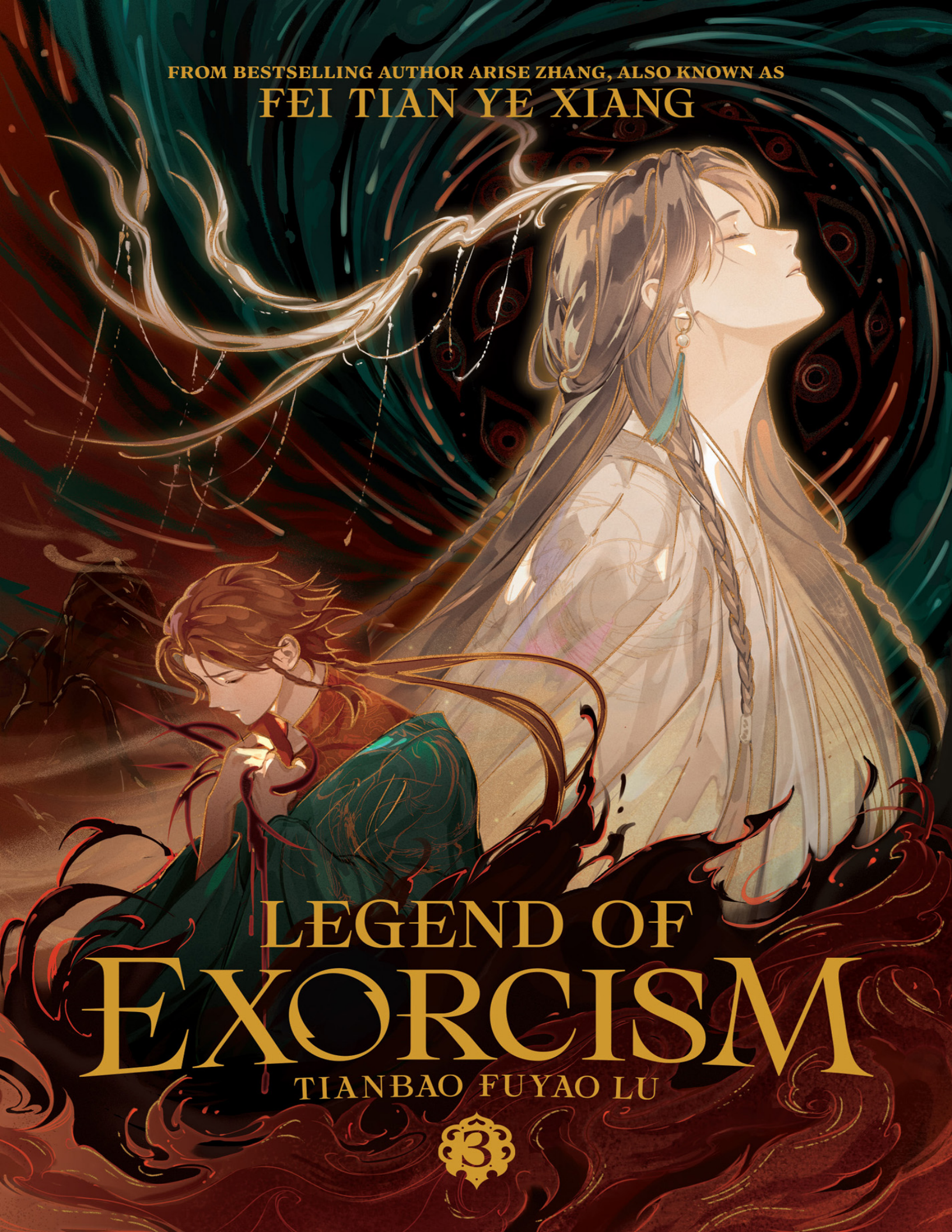
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LEGEND OF
EXORCISM
TIANBAO FUYAO LU
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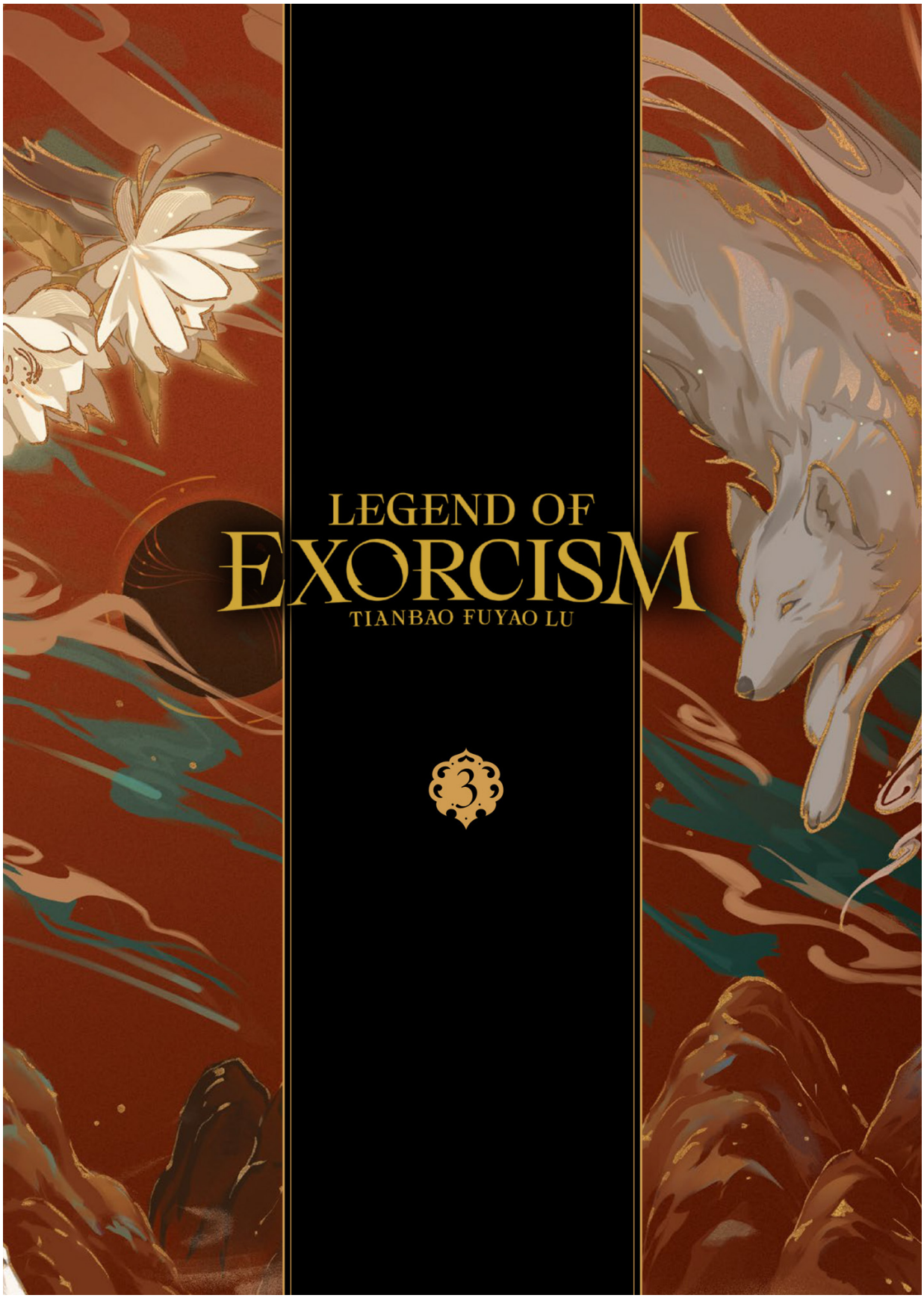
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LEGEND OF EXORCISM

TIANBAO FUYAO LU
天宝伏妖录

3

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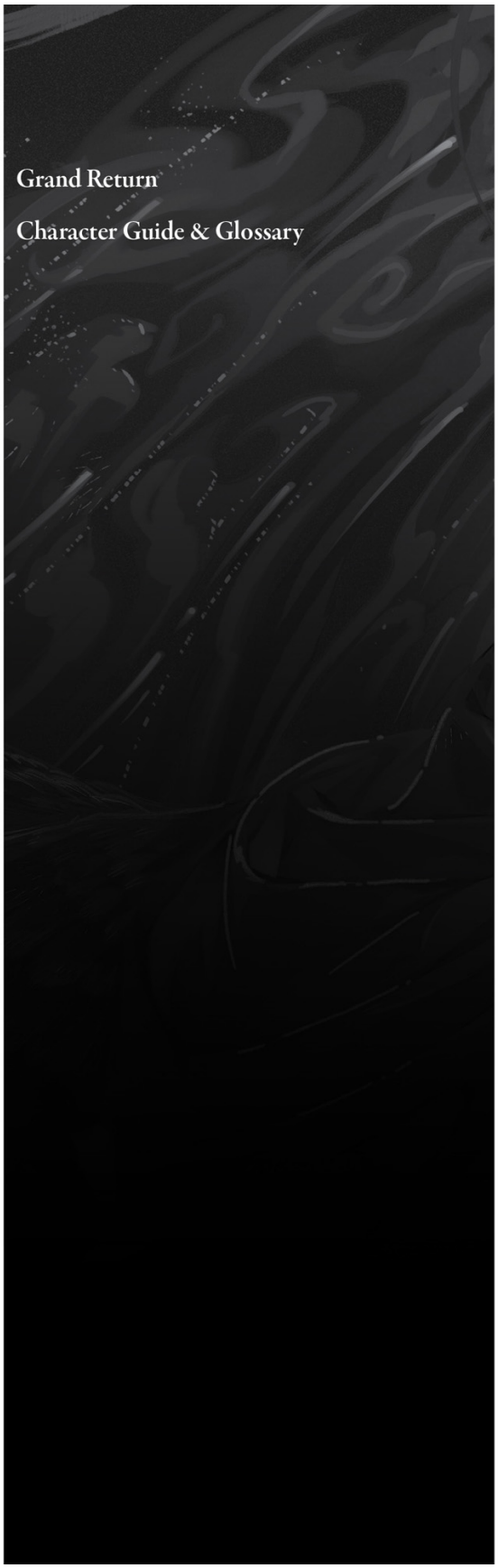

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Chapter 56:
Corpse King Freed

RAYS OF SUNLIGHT spilled over the training grounds as the corpse king turned his face away in pain. “Let me go.”

Hongjun jolted in surprise, while Li Jinglong said nothing.

“Wow,” exclaimed the carp yao. “You can finally talk?”

“Where is…this place?” The ghost king struggled against his bonds. Li Jinglong instructed Lu Xu to take the unconscious Mergen back to bed before pointing the tip of his sword at the ghost king.

“Who are you?” Li Jinglong demanded. “Whose orders are you acting on? How do we cure the corpse poison your troops are spreading? Speak!” The Sword of Wisdom flared with light.

“Remove my chains,” the ghost king said, low and hoarse. His chest rose and fell only when he spoke. “Or you have no right to speak to me.”

“Let’s release him,” Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong hesitated.

“This pillar and your iron chains are far from enough to restrain me,” the ghost king said. “By tonight at the latest, I will free myself. If it comes to that, don’t expect mercy at my hands.”

“I’m only releasing you because Hongjun spoke on your behalf,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll have you know I’m not afraid of you.”

He sheathed the Sword of Wisdom, and Hongjun placed his own saber in Li Jinglong’s outstretched hand. The ghost king let out a roar of fury, averting his face in fear as the heart lamp flared in Li Jinglong’s free hand. The chains clanged as, with a flick of his wrist, Li Jinglong cut the ghost king’s bonds. The ghost king nearly fell to the ground as he stumbled free.

“Go treat the sick first,” Li Jinglong said. “We’ll have questions for you afterward.”

Hongjun led the ghost king down the corridor. He was a tall man, even taller than Li Jinglong, and would have bumped his head against the bells and carved ornamentation hanging from the eaves if he wasn't careful to duck.

"Ghost King," Hongjun said. "My friends were infected by your corpse poison during our battles. Can it be cured?"

"I may have been a king in life, but I am not the king of the fallen corpse ghosts in death. You may call me Liu Fei, or General," the presumed ghost king—Liu Fei—said. "The true king is elsewhere."

"No way!" Hongjun was shocked. "There's another one?!"

"He is still sleeping."

Liu Fei strode into Mergen's room, where Lu Xu was tending to the unconscious man. After a few wary glances at Liu Fei, Lu Xu made room for him at the side of the bed. Liu Fei thanked him—something Lu Xu didn't seem to understand—before prying Mergen's eyelids open with a long, grayish-blue finger. After examining his eyes, he studied Mergen's other injuries.

"The poison on my subordinates' weapons caused this illness," Liu Fei said. "Where are the others?"

Hongjun next took Liu Fei to see Geshu Han. The old general was on the verge of death, and his officers packed the room. At the sight of Liu Fei, the whole assembly drew their weapons with cries of "Monster!" Hongjun had to talk himself hoarse explaining that the corpse ghost was there to treat the general before everyone calmed down.

After examining Geshu Han, Liu Fei pronounced, "This one's barely hanging on. It's the same poison."

When Hongjun had him take a look at the old madam, too, Liu Fei only took a single glance before saying, "She was afflicted with the plague god's poison. She'll recover with the right medicine. Are there more?"

By the time they returned to the main hall, Li Jinglong had transferred all the sick soldiers from the barracks to the training grounds for examination, filling the space with rows of ailing men. Liu Fei took a brief

stroll through their ranks and rendered his judgment: “I don’t need to see any more. They’re all the same.”

“Can they be cured?” Hongjun asked anxiously.

Liu Fei nodded, and Hongjun finally let out a sigh of relief.

“But we have to treat them now, or none of them will make it through the night,” Liu Fei said. “I will write the prescription. Get someone to make the medicine right away.”

When Liu Fei handed over the formula, Hongjun was shocked to find that all the ingredients were deadly poisons—arsenic, heartbreak grass, and pit viper venom. “This…”

“Do it,” Li Jinglong said firmly. “If he wanted them to die, he wouldn’t need to poison them twice. He would only need to wait.”

Figuring he had a point, Hongjun sent people to prepare the concoction.

“Bring me a tank of water,” Liu Fei commanded.

In no time, a group of soldiers had carried in a full tank. Borrowing one of Hongjun’s throwing knives, Liu Fei rolled up his sleeve and plunged the blade into his arm, opening a great gash in his grayish flesh. Inky blood oozed from the wound like sap from a tree, giving off clouds of dark smoke. The instant the first drop fell into the tank, the water inside turned pitch-black.

“After the medicine comes to a boil, add a spoonful of my blood to every bowl,” Liu Fei said. “Feed it to all these men, and they will be cured by midnight tonight.”

As night fell, every lantern remained lit in the general’s estate. A giant pot was dragged out onto the training grounds to prepare the medicinal brew.

Settled on a couch, Liu Fei stitched his wound closed himself. When he struggled to tie the final knot, Hongjun stepped forward to help.

“Now I think we can have a proper talk,” Li Jinglong said.

“I had such a long dream.” Liu Fei leaned back in his seat. “Is there any wine?”

“You still eat after death?” the carp yao asked.

“Even walking corpses need to drink,” Liu Fei replied absently, “or we dry out too fast.”

Hongjun noted this fact in silence.

Li Jinglong ordered someone to bring wine and poured for Liu Fei. “I’ll have a cup with you,” he said. “Hongjun can’t drink.”

“What kind of yaoguai are you?” Liu Fei tilted his head at Hongjun with a look of mild interest. “A phoenix?”

“General Liu,” Li Jinglong cut in. “We are still enemies, not allies. Don’t get too familiar.”

“I’ll go check on the medicine,” Hongjun suggested, rising to leave.

A queer grin spread over Liu Fei’s grayish-blue face. This corpse had a rather roguish smile. “I’m but a soldier,” he said. “My Han dynasty no longer rules this land; I have no desire to compete with humans or yao. What reason have you to be so hostile?”

“You’re the hostile one,” Li Jinglong retorted. “Your armies have massacred the border regions—how fearsome you all are! How many common people have lost their families and homes to your rampage?”

Watching Li Jinglong’s face, Liu Fei took a sip of wine. He muttered, “People live no more than a century, and death comes for us all. Why get so worked up?”

But Li Jinglong refused to back down. “The living have their own ambitions and desires. Even if they don’t fear death, there’s a difference between reaching enlightenment through their own efforts and being hacked to death by your blade, wouldn’t you agree?”

Liu Fei arched a brow. “You remind me of an old friend.” As Li Jinglong started in surprise, Liu Fei pondered a moment. “What was his name again? I’ve forgotten… His surname was Li; Li Guang—that’s right, Li Guang!”

Li Jinglong was dumbstruck.

“A few decades ago, your people composed a poem,” Liu Fei continued. “‘If the Flying General who guarded the nation yet lived, past

the Yin Mountains, never would foreign horses roam.' It was because of a solemn vow I made to him that I chose to follow the ghost king and make camp in Yardang—and there I would stay for nearly nine hundred years."

Li Jinglong was in disbelief. "Why?!"

"To guard the Great Wall." Liu Fei shifted, casually sprawling across the couch with his long hair spilling out around him. He stared vacantly at the wine in his cup. "But before I knew it, I was having a long dream…"

Hongjun had returned and sat down beside Li Jinglong during their exchange. When he heard the last part, he couldn't resist asking, "What kind of dream?"

"I dreamed of my wife, and our first meeting in the Shanglin Gardens," Liu Fei said. "She must be no more than bleached bones by now, reborn into a new life…"

Hongjun suddenly recalled the dream he'd had—he'd stood in a garden in full bloom and turned to see a beautiful woman walking down a corridor. Could he have seen Liu Fei's dream?

What was going on?!

Before Hongjun could bring it up, Li Jinglong asked, "If your mission was to guard the Great Wall and the region beyond Yumen Pass, why would you attack the common people inside the pass?"

"I don't know." Liu Fei shook his head. "Usually, we wake once a decade and head to the Mogao Caves in Sha Prefecture to pay our respects to the deer god. I never expected to find two visitors in the royal mausoleum in Yardang when we woke up this time."

"Wait!" Li Jinglong cried. "What do you mean 'pay your respects to the deer god'?"

Seeming to sense something, Liu Fei turned to gaze out the window. The night sky was dark as a spill of ink, the cawing of crows rising in the distance. "It's nearly midnight," he said and got to his feet.

At the same moment, a soldier rushed inside in a panic. "Bad news! After the general took that medicine, h-he…"

"He's fine." Liu Fei strode out the door.

The dark cloud cover was dispersing in the wind, revealing the bright circle of the twelfth month's full moon spilling its silver rays across the land.

Liu Fei stopped a few steps outside the main hall, his black-and-red combat robes muted in the moonlight. He held his wine cup in his left hand as he pulled open his lapels with his right to reveal a swath of marred skin. A wound gaped open across the left side of his chest.

He stuck his fingers into the torn flesh and pinched, then pulled. With a crisp *pop*, he plucked a dark green core from within his chest.

Under Hongjun's astonished gaze, Liu Fei dropped the brilliantly glowing sphere into his cup. The wine rippled with green light beneath the moon's rays.

"Before the creation of the world, who gave it its natural order?" Liu Fei intoned. "Before the formation of heaven and earth, what provided their pattern? Before the separation of light and dark, who could have made sense of them?"[1] Liu Fei raised his cup almost absently. "O vastness of life and death; call upon the power of heaven and earth, refine the myriad heroic souls buried beneath the ground, and return them to the wine within my cup… Go!"

A strangeness rippled through the air around them. All across the general's estate, points of light emerged from the foreheads of Mergen, Geshu Han, and the dying soldiers on the training grounds, encircling the moonlit night like a jade belt, or the glittering stars of the Milky Way.

"Morning Star!"

"General—!"

Every one of the poison victims stopped breathing at the same time.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong watched in shock. Hongjun could sense a powerful force emanating from Liu Fei's cup, one that transcended the cycle of life and death and interfered with the spiritual meridians running through heaven and earth. Those bright sparks flew toward the heavenly meridians, but the gravity-like pull of the corpse king's core dragged them back down into his cup in a dance as grand as the universe itself.

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Hongjun had never witnessed a magic like this, that traversed the boundaries between life and death. He suspected he might never forget the sight for the rest of his life.

Liu Fei raised the cup higher as he dipped his fingers into the liquid, then flicked them skyward. “To the vast azure skies above, the origin of the myriad forms.”

He flicked again, toward the ground. “To the fertile soil of the Divine Land, the final destination of all living things.”

Finally, with a confident wave of his hand, Liu Fei tossed out the rest of the wine in his cup. “To this vast cosmos and the life which teems within it—souls, return!”

The core flared with light and whirled in midair, releasing the thousands of souls it had absorbed.

Mergen’s eyes flew open as he sucked in a harsh breath, like he’d been startled awake.

Geshu Han’s chest, too, began to rise and fall; his eyes blinked open.

On the training grounds, the soldiers cried out in shock.

“They’re alive—!”

“They’re awake! They’re awake!”

“They’re waking up!”

A shiver went up Hongjun’s spine. He had never known such mysterious and beautiful abilities existed in this world.

“I’m not teaching it to you,” Liu Fei said, seeming to anticipate Hongjun’s question. “This technique defies the order of heaven. Only those like the fallen corpse ghosts, who suffer an eternal curse, are able to use it.”

Liu Fei beckoned, and that green core floated into his hand. He stuffed it back inside his chest and returned to his seat.

Lu Xu’s cries of joy rose from the rear courtyard, and in a moment, Mergen was striding into the main hall. Hongjun shouted and ran to embrace him. Mergen’s heart was still pounding as he looked Liu Fei up and down, but Liu Fei merely nodded in his direction.

Li Jinglong straightened his robes and said formally, “Thank you, General Liu.”

Watching Li Jinglong, Mergen guessed it was Liu Fei who had saved their lives. He echoed solemnly, “Thank you.”

“This began because of me,” Liu Fei replied, “so it was up to me to resolve it. I’ve caused quite a lot of trouble for you. There is no need to thank me.”

Mergen hadn’t eaten properly in days, and Hongjun was ready to run off at once to find him some food. The general’s estate was in chaos; Geshu Han had woken, and a messenger on a swift horse came bearing news that Qin Liang and the deputy military governor, Wang Lun, had both recovered as well. To avoid putting their hosts to more trouble, Li Jinglong suggested they ask the servants to bring ingredients to the side courtyard where they were staying. They would cook their own meal there.

There was another flurry of activity as the soldiers helped them set up a charcoal stove and cook a full pot of stew. Hongjun, Li Jinglong, Mergen, and Lu Xu were hungry enough to eat a horse, and they all grabbed bowls and chopsticks and settled around the fire. Liu Fei sat off to the side, drinking his wine.

“What year is it?” Liu Fei abruptly asked.

“The twelfth year of Tianbao,” Li Jinglong said. “At the end of this month, it will be the thirteenth.”

Liu Fei ticked off the years on his fingers but couldn’t calculate the exact span of time that had passed. He waved a hand as if to dismiss the thought. “If there is no war, we sleep in our coffins and wake on the first night of Lidong once a decade. We leave Yardang and patrol Yang Pass and Yumen Pass to ward off the Xiongnu threat.”

Li Jinglong recalled what Liu Fei had told them before casting his spell. “You said…two visitors came that night?”

“Yes.” Liu Fei nodded. “It was strange. The entrance to the General’s Tomb in Yardang is well hidden. I don’t know how they found their way in.”

Hongjun was so caught up listening he forgot to move his chopsticks. Li Jinglong put another piece of meat in his bowl and reminded him to eat, then poured Liu Fei more wine.

“They claimed they were envoys of the yao king.”

“What?!” Hongjun, Li Jinglong, and Mergen yelped in shock. Lu Xu looked from them to Liu Fei, confused.

“Isn’t the yao king dead?!” Hongjun cried in disbelief.

“Dead?” Liu Fei spread his hands. “I wouldn’t know.”

It couldn’t be Dad, could it? Hongjun wondered silently.

Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun, then offered his own hypothesis. “Maybe that black jiao is still alive.”

That made more sense. Liu Fei considered it as well. “They ordered me and my king to lead the fallen-corpse-ghost army at Mara’s command.”

“You and your king,” Li Jinglong repeated. “Who is your king?”

“A man of the Qin dynasty,” Liu Fei said slowly. “He is the first fallen corpse ghost, and he is our ruler. Legends say that when the world’s bravest soldiers lay down their lives for their nation, he will recognize their valiant sacrifice and gift them with an undying form to serve under his command.”

Mergen sensed they were on the edge of something crucial. He asked with new urgency, “Where is he now?”

“I do not know,” Liu Fei murmured. “Perhaps he still sleeps within the General’s Tomb.”

Everyone fell quiet, each preoccupied with his own thoughts. Only Lu Xu continued to eat as if nothing was amiss.

“Then…what happened after?” Mergen pressed.

“My king and I refused them, of course,” Liu Fei said. He sank into silence, as if working to recall the particulars. No one interrupted him. “I readied my things and set out as usual, entering the pass through Yardang so we could pay our respects at the Mogao Caves. But as we reached our destination—or perhaps it was when we were still on the way; I can no longer recall—I started dreaming.”

“You had a nightmare,” Mergen said.

“Yes.”

“What do you mean by ‘pay your respects’?” Li Jinglong frowned. “Why do you go to the Mogao Caves?”

“Others categorize the fallen corpse ghosts as yao,” Liu Fei began, “but we see ourselves as distinct—part of the yao race only by tenuous association.”

Liu Fei had lived as a fallen corpse ghost for nine hundred years after his mortal death; he had likely done quite a bit of thinking about his current existence. Hongjun listened eagerly, not daring to speak.

“We must leave our coffins and fight when the Divine Land is in peril, foreign tribes invade, or the people are suffering. But for most of the remaining time, we sleep.”

Mergen’s breathing hitched as he seemed to realize something.

“And with sleep comes dreams,” Liu Fei went on. “The master of dreams and walker of dreamscapes is the ancient deer god: a nature spirit born of the forest, the grasslands, and the desert.”

“The white deer?” Mergen asked.

“White deer?” Liu Fei considered this. “To be precise, it is the nine-colored deer.”

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Chapter 57:
Snowy Fields under Clear Skies

"DEER!" Lu Xu echoed.

Everyone turned to Lu Xu. Mergen recalled how the first time he had met Lu Xu, he thought he had mentioned a deer. However, Lu Xu's surname was pronounced the same way as the word deer—*lu*—and as often as he repeated it, Mergen still hadn't figured out whether the young man was saying his own name or if he had actually seen the white deer Mergen sought.

"The deer…" Liu Fei nodded. "The nine-colored deer resides in the Mogao Caves. Once per decade, the patrol route of the corpse-ghost army ends in the Mogao Caves' central hall, where we pay our respects to the god of dreams."

"What kinds of dreams do you have?" Hongjun asked in curiosity.

Hongjun's question was off topic, but Li Jinglong didn't redirect him. Mergen thought in silence, while Lu Xu set down his bowl, finished with his meal. Mergen took the stew pot off the little stove and swapped it for a kettle and tea cakes, and Li Jinglong set up a low table and made everyone tea.

"All kinds," Liu Fei said, unhurried. "Mostly of my life before. The fallen corpse ghosts are deceased, but we are not reincarnated through the natural meridians. Scenes from our own past are the only thing that allows us to rest peacefully."

"Who were the two envoys?" Li Jinglong asked.

"One of them was the plague god, Wenshen," Liu Fei said. "The other was called Xuannü, the dark lady—I'm not sure what type of yao she was. They used some ability that left me dreaming for a full year, unable to escape."

Mergen was muttering, "The nine-colored deer…nine-colored deer…"

“You possess the ability of the wolf god reincarnated, correct?” Liu Fei cast Mergen a glance.

“Yes, and the white deer is the one I seek. Perhaps it has something to do with this nine-colored deer.”

“The white deer you’re looking for and the nine-colored deer god are one and the same,” Liu Fei said. As Mergen’s eyes went wide, Liu Fei continued, “The deer god has nine colors, but they only appear as nine tufts of fur on its body. It is otherwise pure white.”

“It’s right at your fingertips, Mergen,” Li Jinglong cautioned. “Don’t panic.”

Mergen knew this was bigger than himself. Despite his urgency, he took a steadying breath.

Li Jinglong turned back to Liu Fei. “If the yao king could entrap you within a dream, perhaps he already has the nine-colored deer under his control.”

“Indeed.” Liu Fei set down his wine and accepted the tea Hongjun offered. “If that’s the case, we have trouble on our hands. I suspect after they failed to entice us with their offer, they trapped us within a nightmare and unleashed us on Hexi, where they had us slay every living soul in our path and convert them into fallen corpse ghosts to swell our ranks.”

“And Mara…” Hongjun recalled the disjointed conversation he’d overheard between Chong Ming and Qing Xiong before his departure from Yaojin Palace.

“Mara’s resurrection is close at hand,” the carp yao piped up. “If the yao king holds the corpse-ghost army as well, no one will be able to defeat him.”

“All we know of the resurrection of Mara is myth and legend,” Liu Fei said. “Even I didn’t see the last iteration of this thousand-year cycle—perhaps my king knows more about it. But even rounding up, hasn’t it been only nine hundred years since the heavenly demon’s last appearance? It oughtn’t occur a whole hundred years ahead of schedule.”

They were finishing their tea when Geshu Han’s messenger came to the side courtyard to find them. Li Jinglong sent him away, telling him they

would speak more tomorrow. After all, they were still sorting out their own problems.

“We won’t disturb you any longer,” Li Jinglong told Liu Fei. “I’ll ask General Liu to stay here at the estate for tonight. We can continue our discussion in the morning.”

Liu Fei knew the exorcists would want to discuss among themselves, so he readily agreed. Fallen corpse ghosts were averse to the sun, so they couldn’t leave Liu Fei out in the courtyard, but Li Jinglong was reluctant to displace any other members of the estate. They gave Mergen’s room to Liu Fei, while Li Jinglong, Hongjun, Mergen, and Lu Xu crammed into the room Li Jinglong had previously shared with Hongjun.

Everyone was exhausted; Li Jinglong and Hongjun, in particular, hadn’t properly rested since the beginning of this crisis. Yet for two of their company, their desire to discuss what had just transpired remained stronger than their fatigue.

Mergen urged Lu Xu to take the inside of one of the two beds and settled himself on the outside. “I have to make a trip to the Mogao Caves as soon as possible.”

“Mergen, the nine-colored deer isn’t going anywhere,” Li Jinglong said. “There are a whole host of implications here; we need to prepare for every eventuality before we go. We’ve made too many mistakes on this excursion to Hexi—we only made it this far by sheer luck.”

None of them could deny it. If any of their group had been missing, the prefectural capital would have been doomed, seized as the yao king’s territory with hardly any resistance.

“But that’s why it’s so important,” Mergen protested. “Liu Fei was clear. The yao king is using the white deer to control the fallen corpse ghosts in order to build his army and prepare for Mara’s resurrection. If we don’t find the white deer soon—”

“And you think you’re a match for Liu Fei’s king?” Li Jinglong countered.

Lu Xu had lain down facing the wall; Hongjun, too, was so tired he was seeing double. “Are you going to let us sleep or not?!” he protested. “Can’t you talk about this tomorrow?”

Chastened, Li Jinglong and Mergen quieted down.

When Hongjun opened his eyes the next morning, the room was empty. He went outside to wash up and was informed by the carp yao that Mergen and Li Jinglong were discussing the matter of Yardang with Geshu Han.

“Say, I saved so many people yesterday—how come I still don’t have enough merits to transform into a dragon?” the carp yao asked. “Even a human would do.”

Hongjun didn’t know either. Considering everything the carp yao had done for the Department of Exorcism, he should have gathered plenty of merits. Surely *something* should have happened by now.

“Maybe it’s because you didn’t do it with your own hands,” Hongjun suggested.

The carp yao sank into gloom. How was he supposed to save people with his own hands?

Hongjun said a few words of comfort and promised that the next time a chance to earn merits appeared, he would step aside and let Zhao Zilong show his stuff.

Having concluded their meeting with the general, Li Jinglong and Mergen bustled in through the corridor mid-conversation. “But what should we do about the kid?” Li Jinglong asked.

Mergen cast a glance at Hongjun, who rose to join them. It seemed that, during their meeting with Geshu Han, Li Jinglong asked the general to summon the guard who’d harassed Lu Xu. According to the soldier, Lu Xu hadn’t been scared witless by the corpse-ghost army; he’d been this way since he was born. He’d merely become more unbalanced than usual after witnessing the corpse soldiers slaughter a city.

Lu Xu’s father was Shiwei, and his mother was Uyghur. He’d always been scattered and slow, but he had one undeniable skill: He ran as fast as the wind. At the age of twelve, his father had brought him to Yumen Pass, hoping to find him some occupation. Liu Nisun, the garrison commander,

had taken the boy in and employed him as a scout once he came of age, tasking him with passing messages between the troops.

He spent his days running to and fro, only getting more fleet-footed with age. Later on, he learned a bit of martial arts to defend himself. He and his benefactor Liu Nisun had been transferred back inside the pass, only to run headfirst into this disaster.

“When Lu Xu was young, the only word he could say was his own surname,” Li Jinglong said. “The word he keeps repeating is his name, *Lu*, not *lu* as in deer. You were mistaken.”

Mergen shook his head with a bitter chuckle just as Lu Xu walked in from the garden. He shot the three of them a quizzical look.

Hongjun waved Lu Xu over—he was already awfully fond of him. “Lu Xu, come with me. Let’s go find something good to eat.”

Lu Xu looked at Li Jinglong, then at Mergen.

“What are your plans?” Li Jinglong asked Mergen.

Mergen thought a moment. “Forget it. Chief, you’re right.” He looked up at Li Jinglong, who nodded and gave him a bracing pat on the shoulder.

Hongjun blinked. “What are you two talking about?”

“I’m taking you out to eat.” Li Jinglong tugged Hongjun away without answering.

“Lu Xu.” Mergen beckoned with a smile. “Come here.”

Lu Xu looked at Hongjun’s retreating figure, then back at Mergen. “Morning Star.”

Mergen leapt up and crouched on the corridor railing. Lu Xu giggled and sat down beside him.

“I’ve put you to a lot of trouble these past few days.” Mergen slung an arm around Lu Xu’s shoulders and turned his face to the bright, sunny courtyard. “The chief said you took care of me when I was ill.”

“Hongjun,” Lu Xu replied.

Mergen smiled and waved a hand, seemingly a bit embarrassed. “It’s expected for Hongjun to take care of me. We’ve survived life-or-death

situations together; he's one of our own." He ducked his head and scratched the nape of his neck, like a wolf deep in thought.

Lu Xu tilted his head at Mergen, frowning slightly.

"We're exorcists from Chang'an," Mergen explained. "People outside the Great Wall used to call me 'Morning Star'—when I first left home, I had a phase where I wanted to be a big hero, so I let them, as a joke."

Lu Xu looked Mergen up and down. Today he was dressed in navy-blue combat robes with a sable coat and hat over top, accentuating the handsome lines of his figure. Lu Xu reached a hand inside Mergen's coat and touched the fabric of his robes.

"Hongjun," Lu Xu repeated.

"Right." Mergen nodded. "He's also wearing this uniform today. It's the official uniform of the Department of Exorcism."

Li Jinglong and Hongjun left the general's estate and took a lap around the garrison. All the soldiers had made a full recovery. They next went to the prefect Qin Liang's residence, where Qin Xuan and her mother insisted they stay for a meal to express their gratitude. Hongjun thanked them but politely refused. After wandering through the city, he and Li Jinglong ended up in one of the prefectural capital's restaurants.

This establishment was famous for its northwestern cuisine and served a rare delicacy: whole roast lamb. Li Jinglong ordered for both of them, then turned to Hongjun. "At least we can finally have a proper break."

"But what do we do about everything else?" Now it was Hongjun's turn to worry. They still hadn't solved the problem of the corpse-ghost army, and it seemed the conundrum Chong Ming and Qing Xiong discussed long ago—the resurrection of Mara—was also somehow connected to their current troubles.

Li Jinglong knew Hongjun sympathized with the yao race; after all, he was half yao himself. Ever since their first case with the fox yao, Hongjun had displayed a certain kinship with almost all the yao they met. This kind of attachment wasn't something that could be broken by force.

“I spoke with Liu Fei this morning,” Li Jinglong replied. “I asked him to head back and scout out the situation, and to contact us with any new discoveries. If fighting breaks out, we won’t stand a chance against their army of thousands without his help.”

“You want to wait for reinforcements?”

“Yes. Once Yongsi and A-Tai arrive, we can make a plan together. After Liu Fei finds his commander, the true king of the corpse ghosts, we’ll launch a surprise attack to reach him. Then, once Mergen awakens the ghost king, we’ll take on the plague god who disguised himself as Zhang Hao and the dark lady who has yet to show herself. I told old General Geshu Han to fortify the defenses of all the major cities in Hexi and evacuate the residents of the smaller villages in the meantime.”

It seemed Li Jinglong had accounted for everything; Hongjun felt his worries melt away. Li Jinglong continued, “We’ll deal with the major threat at hand—the real ghost king. *Then* we can search for Mergen’s white deer.”

“Mm,” Hongjun agreed. “Is Lu Xu coming with us?”

“He’s not,” Li Jinglong said. “The life of an exorcist is too dangerous, and that kid doesn’t even have a spiritual device. He just runs fast, is all. We needed all the help we could get before, but Hongjun, if you really want what’s best for him, you’ll take care not to involve him further.”

Back at the general’s estate, Mergen and Lu Xu sat bathed in sunlight. Mergen patted Lu Xu on the head. “Thank you for keeping me company all this time, Lu Xu.”

Lu Xu ducked away from his hand, seemingly deep in thought.

“I have to go to the Mogao Caves to search for the nine-colored deer. It’ll be dangerous. I can’t bring you with me.”

Lu Xu jerked his head up with a look of surprise. He frowned, then got to his feet and quietly stared at Mergen.

“The chief already talked to General Geshu Han. You can stay in the army and keep your position as a scout… Lu Xu?”

He stalked away. Mergen jogged after Lu Xu. He knew Lu Xu didn’t want to leave him, but—“You have no spiritual energy! You’re an ordinary

mortal. You can't…"

Lu Xu sped up until Mergen had to break into a run. "Lu Xu!"

The young man whipped around and glared, but still said nothing.

Mergen's heart twinged. They had kept each other company from Jiayu Pass all the way to the Liang Prefecture capital; it would be a lie to say he hadn't grown fond of Lu Xu.

"Gege will come back and check on you. Be good." Mergen sounded downcast even to himself.

Lu Xu turned and sprinted away, and Mergen sighed, chagrined.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong strolled back to the estate, leading their horses.

"There's less than half a month until the new year," Li Jinglong commented. "Who knows whether A-Tai and Yongsi will make it in time, but at least Mergen is here. It's half a reunion."

Letters had been sent both to A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi via the city's relay station. Li Jinglong's message detailed the current situation as well as the information they'd gleaned regarding the yao king and Mara, and asked them to make haste to Liang Prefecture. Hongjun had wanted to send Qing Xiong a letter too, but he had no idea how to address it. He resolved to ask Qing Xiong for a way to reach him the next time he had a chance.

Li Jinglong was due to return to the general's estate that afternoon to discuss defensive arrangements with Geshu Han. "We've all been run ragged," he told Hongjun. "I'll take you out to do something fun in a few days. What do you say?"

Hongjun lit up at this long-awaited suggestion—every time a major battle drew to a close, Li Jinglong would give them a vacation and take him out. It seemed the tradition still stood, even if it was just the two of them.

"I haven't thought much about it." Liang Prefecture was all ice and snow right now, but there seemed to be several pleasure houses in the city. Though for some reason, the idea seemed less enticing to Hongjun than it had before.

“Think about it,” Li Jinglong said. “If no urgent military affairs come up in the next few days, we’re on vacation. Just don’t leave the city.”

Hongjun and Mergen may have been on vacation, but it seemed Li Jinglong still had plenty to do. Hongjun had never learned any military strategy, so there wasn’t much he could do to help. “I’ll wait until you’re done,” he said.

Li Jinglong set off for Geshu Han’s office, while Hongjun crossed the courtyard to return to their room.

“Hongjun!” Mergen called from overhead.

Hongjun leapt up to the top of the covered corridor to join him. The winter sun wrapped them in its warm embrace as they watched the denizens of the general’s estate busily airing their blankets while the skies were clear. The snow inside the city had all vanished under the sun, and by now, two days’ worth of snowmelt on the roof had been baked dry. Mergen had brought the blankets from their room and spread them over the colored glass of the roof tiles. Reclined on the blankets, he stared into space with a piece of straw dangling from his mouth. He patted the spot next to him, inviting Hongjun to join him.

“Where’s Lu Xu?”

Mergen plucked the straw out. “Have you fallen for that kid?” he asked with a smile.

“No way!”

“Don’t you like little foxes and cute things like that?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Stay, talk to me. We haven’t seen each other in so long—didn’t you miss me?”

Glancing at Mergen again, Hongjun saw he looked rather dejected. He suddenly recalled what Li Jinglong had said—had Mergen sent Lu Xu away already? Hongjun and Lu Xu had fought together as well, and he also cared for him. Hongjun, too, would be sad to see him go.

“How long has it been?” Hongjun chuckled and lay down next to Mergen. “A month at most.”

“Morning Star, Hongjun, Morning Star, Hongjun…” Mergen squinted up at the cheerful winter sun. “That kid doesn’t remember the chief’s name though.”

With a start, Hongjun realized that after all this time, he was the only person Lu Xu called by name. “What’s ‘morning star’?”

Mergen’s handsome face went pink. “An old nickname. Don’t ask.”

Hongjun also squinted up into the sky. Resting on the sun-warmed blankets beneath its warm rays reminded him of lying on Chong Ming’s chest when he was little. “Mergen…”

“Call me Gege,” Mergen said, straight-faced.

Hongjun ignored him. “Have you ever wondered what your life will be like years from now?”

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

Aside from Li Jinglong, Hongjun had always been closest to Mergen. He had been second to report to the ramshackle Department of Exorcism, finding Hongjun asleep on the ground, and the first real friend Hongjun had made in the mortal realm.

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Chapter 58:
Snow God Xuannü

"I'M JUST A LITTLE…" Hongjun looked up at the great, fluffy white clouds floating across the sky before settling on: "lost."

"What my life will be like years from now…" Mergen thought a moment, then said, "I have to find the white deer."

"And after you find her?"

"After?" Mergen pillowed his head on his arm, eyes slitted as he basked in the winter sun. "I'll take her as my wife, and once the Divine Land is no longer threatened by demons and yao, I'll return to Shiwei territory."

"And become the chief?" Hongjun asked.

"No," Mergen said. "That will probably be my second brother. The gray wolf can't hold the position. We'll live on the plains; hunt, herd sheep, and have a whole brood of children. When spring comes, we'll take them riding across the grasslands, and in autumn, we'll take them hunting, and they can bring their prize kills to their lovers." Mergen smiled. "When all the children grow up, we'll be old too, and we'll sit on the shores of Hulun Lake. We'll watch the birds flying overhead and wait for winter's first snowfall. We'll guard the winter dreams of the Shiwei, the Han, the Semu, and all the peoples of the world."

"But you've never even seen the white deer's face," Hongjun said.

"She's definitely a beautiful girl."

"You'll be just like the old general and his wife?"

"That's right." Mergen smiled.

"But you haven't even met her. What if…what if she doesn't want the same thing as you? What if you don't love her? What if she doesn't love you?"

Mergen went silent.

The oldest Shiwei legends said the gray wolf and the white deer were the guardian deities of the day and night. The young man with the power of the gray wolf was destined to spend his life with the white deer. Mergen had never considered these questions. After a long moment, he said earnestly, “That’s impossible.”

Hongjun didn’t push the matter. After bringing up his one doubt, he let Mergen’s beautiful visions of the future fill his mind’s eye.

Li Jinglong was still discussing defense arrangements with Geshu Han. Combining what they had learned after several major battles with what Liu Fei had told them himself, they mapped out the route of the fallen corpse ghosts’ invasion.

The undead army had marched from Yardang to Yumen Pass, detoured around Sha Prefecture and Dunhuang, then split their forces into two. One division followed the Han-dynasty-era Great Wall south through the district capitals of Wulin and Suchao, avoiding the local garrisons. The other followed the Qilian Mountains, razing countless small villages along the way. Finally, they had regrouped outside the capital of Liang Prefecture for a pincer attack, only to be foiled by Li Jinglong and Hongjun. The defeated army had withdrawn from the city and retreated north.

“Two men.” Geshu Han shook his head in disbelief. “Two men routed an army a hundred thousand strong.”

“To be precise,” Li Jinglong said, “three men and a fish.”

Hongjun stepped inside to find Li Jinglong and Geshu Han’s officers gathered around the map. Li Jinglong glanced up at his entry and beckoned him to his side.

“It only worked because they were monsters,” Hongjun added. “We couldn’t have defeated ordinary men like that.”

Geshu Han gave Hongjun an appraising look. “It seems I was fortunate not to have caught up with you when we fought before. That corpse-ghost king is one thing, but who knows if I’d be able to withstand a blow from you.”

Li Jinglong caught the undercurrent of trepidation beneath Geshu Han's words—the same trepidation tactfully expressed by the emperor and crown prince. "The Department of Exorcism operates under certain restrictions of our own. If we were to participate in mortal conflicts, heedless of the destruction we could wreak upon ordinary lives, divine punishment would befall us."

At that, Geshu Han seemed to relax a little. "Then you cannot fight the Göktürk and Uyghur armies in defense of the nation?"

"We cannot," Li Jinglong confirmed without hesitation.

Geshu Han gave him a slow nod. "In that case, the responsibility for arresting the fallen corpse ghosts and the plague god who impersonated Zhang Hao is yours."

Li Jinglong nodded in return. He and Hongjun cupped their fists in salute and excused themselves.

When they were out of earshot, Hongjun asked, "Why have I never heard anything about this divine punishment?"

"I made it up," Li Jinglong said absently. "As for the corpse ghosts—Geshu Han sent scouts to tail them after their retreat."

Hongjun perked up. "Did they find them?"

"A snowstorm blew in during their pursuit, and they lost them."

"A snowstorm?" Hongjun had an ominous feeling.

"Mm." The corner of Li Jinglong's mouth quirked up as he watched Hongjun. "A snowstorm." Looking out at the warm sunlight streaming down outside the corridor, he said, "Every time the corpse ghosts appear, they are accompanied by biting cold and falling snow. Do you think this is coincidence or design?"

Hongjun found he was getting better at keeping up with Li Jinglong's train of thought—he had an inkling as to what Li Jinglong was suggesting.

"Shall we investigate?" Li Jinglong asked. "If we can deduce the other great yaoguai's true form, we may save ourselves a lot of trouble."

Hongjun strode off toward their room, where he pulled out the bestiary Qing Xiong had given him. As the saying went, "Know thine

enemy, and thou shalt go undefeated."

They had only gotten into such a fix before because the nine-tailed fox had caught Li Jinglong off guard. He never wanted to make that mistake again.

"Look here," Li Jinglong said, pointing to a particular page.

The bestiary was an old tome—another artifact left behind by Di Renjie, in fact—and many of the pages were tattered or foxed with age. The earlier sections covered only minor beasts, but the creatures discussed grew more and more powerful as the book progressed. Pages circled in black represented yaoguai that had been vanquished, while red circles marked the most dangerous subjects.

What contents remained were quite detailed, but it was missing many pages, their torn edges sticking out of the spine. The page describing nine-tailed celestial foxes seemed to have vanished. The ones covering the dragon's sons were still there, though three had been defeated now. Hongjun marked their pages in black ink.

Flipping back a few pages, they found a yaoguai called Xuannü—the dark lady. She was pictured wearing a robe with long, flowing sleeves like black water, her face a dark blotch of ink.

"In the northwest, there is a snow deity that resides atop the Qilian Mountains…" Hongjun read aloud. Her page wasn't far from a block of missing ones. There must have once been three pages about the fallen-corpse-ghost king here, but they, too, were torn and incomplete.

"She's not as powerful as the nine-tailed celestial fox," Li Jinglong said.

"But it doesn't say anything about her weaknesses," Hongjun replied. "There are many yaoguai in here that Di Renjie never saw in person."

"Well, we know she summons the cold," Li Jinglong said. "So we must be prepared to endure it. Why don't we check a few more pages back?"

"The plague god!" Hongjun had flipped to a depiction of the yaoguai, which looked like a pile of putrid mud. *So he's in here too!*

They leaned in, perusing the book with their heads together. According to the page, the plague god Wenshen was extremely dangerous to ordinary mortals. In addition to spreading pestilence, he could devour their bodies to strengthen himself.

“This was the illness that afflicted the old madam,” Li Jinglong said. “If the victim hasn’t inhaled too much of the poison mist, they can be cured with a golden pill dissolved in cold water.”

“Any ordinary doctor can make it,” Hongjun said. “The old madam is already stabilizing. She should be all right.”

“Aside from these abilities, the plague god is weak,” Li Jinglong said, scanning the entry. “My heart lamp can hold him off, and you have yao energy. We could surround him and beat him up with nothing more than a shovel. The real question is what we ought to do about the dark lady.”

At the reminder, Hongjun reached out to pull open Li Jinglong’s robes. Li Jinglong didn’t evade, allowing Hongjun to expose the sigil over the left side of his chest, where the heart lamp resided.

“Its power isn’t depleted yet,” Hongjun said.

“I wouldn’t drain it that quickly,” Li Jinglong said. “If it gets uncomfortable, I’ll come to you.”

Hongjun studied it for a while. “I just don’t like how it looks.”

Li Jinglong resettled his lapels and rose to his feet. “I have some work to do. Stay here and think about what we should do next.”

Hongjun was stumped. But at least he wasn’t afraid of that snowstorm yaoguai—he knew plenty of fire-type phoenix spiritual techniques. If Liu Fei was correct, the plague god had likely fled back to Yardang to regroup with the dark lady and plot their revenge. To reach Yardang, they would have to pass through Sha Prefecture and Gua Prefecture on their way north…

As the sun slanted toward the west, his thoughts were interrupted by the clanking of armor. Liu Fei walked into the room and looked at Hongjun. “Where is your comrade?”

Hongjun sprang up to welcome him inside, but Liu Fei waved him off. “We just received the scouts’ report. I’m taking my leave.”

“I’ll fetch the chief for you,” Hongjun said. “I can’t make any decisions on my own…”

“I am informing you, not asking your permission.” Li Jinglong had returned Liu Fei’s sword, and the corpse ghost’s voice was placid as he hefted the wind blade in his hand. “The corpse-ghost army is my responsibility. I cannot cause you any more trouble.”

Liu Fei turned and strode back through the door. When Hongjun protested that he couldn’t make the journey on foot, Liu Fei had an answer for that too: “There are many fallen horses outside the city. I only need to summon one to my service. The winds are harsh on the plains at night. You needn’t escort me any further.”

There wasn’t a thing Hongjun could do to stop him. Liu Fei merely asked to take the rest of last night’s jug of wine before he left. Hongjun watched him walk through the rear door of the general’s estate, holding the jug in one hand and his helmet in the other.

When he was nearly out of sight, Hongjun called out, “Will you be all right?”

Beneath the amber light of the evening sun, Liu Fei waved a hand at Hongjun.

Hongjun didn’t quite understand what the lonely general was thinking. But when he sat back down inside the hall, his sense of disquiet grew. *Liu Fei won’t go and get himself killed, will he? But isn’t he already dead? Actually, is there anything that can kill him?*

Liu Fei’s subordinates were all gone. How was he to return and lead them again? With his wind blade? What if he couldn’t regain control? And even if he commanded an army fifty thousand strong, if it came down to it, could he defeat his own commander?

As Hongjun sat in a cold sweat, Lu Xu appeared in the doorway.

“Hongjun.”

Hongjun made room for him on the couch and patted him on the shoulder. He really did like Lu Xu. He’d seen how meticulously Lu Xu had watched over Mergen when he was ill, and it tickled him that Lu Xu only ever said the names *Morning Star* and *Hongjun*. They had been acquainted

for less than ten days, but Lu Xu had called his name countless times, practically more than anyone else in his entire life. Even Chong Ming usually jumped straight to whatever was on his mind, skipping any form of address.

“Are you hungry?” Hongjun asked.

Lu Xu shook his head. His hair was damp like he had just gotten out of the bath, and he was still trying to dig water out of his ears.

“Let me help,” Hongjun said.

Lu Xu lay down across Hongjun’s lap. Hongjun took an ear pick, wrapped it in soft cloth, and set to cleaning his ear. Midway through, Lu Xu’s shoulders twitched. Pleased, Hongjun said, “It feels good, doesn’t it? Qing Xiong loves when I clean his ears.”

He suddenly realized that his knees were damp—Lu Xu was quietly sobbing into his lap.

“What is it?” Hongjun quickly pulled him up to sitting. “Lu Xu, are you all right?”

Lu Xu jumped to his feet and fled toward the door. “I haven’t done the other side yet!” Hongjun called after him.

He turned and gave Hongjun a sorrowful look over his shoulder. Hongjun stared back in puzzlement. He wanted to ask what was wrong, but Lu Xu couldn’t talk. Even if he asked, Lu Xu would at most give him a simple, one-word answer.

“Wait here,” Hongjun said, rising to his feet. “I’ll go get Mergen.”

As soon as he ran off, Lu Xu left too, hurrying down the corridor toward their room.

Hongjun couldn’t track Mergen down in the vastness of the general’s estate. When he went back to look for Lu Xu, Lu Xu was also gone.

“Lu Xu? Lu Xu!”

Hongjun pulled on his outer robe and ran outside to ask the guards, who said the scout had already left the estate. Back inside, the carp yao was sitting at the edge of the corridor soaking his feet. Hongjun snatched him up and stuffed him into his bag, tying a cursory knot on top, then ran back out.

“Hongjun! What are you doing?!” came the muffled voice from inside the bag.

“Lu Xu ran off! This is bad! I need to send Li Jinglong a message…”

“I’ll go, I’ll go!”

But Hongjun refused to let Zhao Zilong leave. He slung the bag over his back as he leapt astride his horse to search for Lu Xu. Jostled with every beat of the horse’s hooves, the carp yao wailed, “Spare me, please!”

Darkness had fallen; lanterns burned bright in the general’s command center. Li Jinglong sat bare-chested in a room within the garrison, Mergen standing off to the side as a tattoo artist worked on Li Jinglong’s skin. Tattoos were popular in the Great Tang army: Soldiers often tattooed their generals’ crests as well as military identifiers on their backs or shoulders. The former was done in a bid for protection from the guardian deities depicted on the crest, while the latter ensured that if they died on the battlefield, their comrades could still identify their bodies even if they lost their tokens.

Tattooing was a delicate art, and the man had been working for nearly two hours. It was a small piece, placed right over the darkened sigil on Li Jinglong’s chest.

Mergen watched the process for a while. “How come you were a blank canvas before?”

“I didn’t want one before,” Li Jinglong said. “I cared a lot about my skin. But I’ve collected a few scars now. One more mark won’t make a difference.”

Mergen chuckled. “Why do I feel like that’s not the real reason, hm?”

“Shut up,” Li Jinglong groused. “All those strange comments I hear coming out of Hongjun’s mouth—which of them didn’t he learn from you guys?”

Mergen carried over a wooden stool. “Do one for me too.” He handed the tattoo artist the little wooden deer Lu Xu had carved on their journey. “This design.”

The tattoo artist had just finished his work on Li Jinglong's chest. "Be careful for the next five days. Don't get it wet." He switched out his needles, disinfected them over a flame, then drew up new dye.

Mergen opened his outer robe, then asked the tattoo artist to place the design on his chest.

Li Jinglong picked up the wooden deer and examined it. "Did you carve this?"

"No, Lu Xu did," Mergen said.

Li Jinglong hesitated, and Mergen gave him a quizzical look. "Lu Xu wasn't actually talking about a deer," Li Jinglong said after a pause. "You misheard. He was just repeating his own surname."

Mergen nodded. Li Jinglong held the wooden carving between his fingers and said, "But then…how do you explain this?"

Mergen's eyes went wide. Before he could jump to his feet, Li Jinglong pushed him back down. The artist had just gotten started. They could discuss it when he finished.

"There's something I've been wondering. Is the power of the gray wolf passed down through blood, or is it the same soul reincarnated over multiple lifetimes?" Li Jinglong looked into the mirror and studied his newly completed tattoo, tapping his fingers absently on the table.

Mergen sank into thought. Li Jinglong cast him a look. "It's fine; if you don't wish to share, I don't mind. Either way, I made a promise to every member of the Department of Exorcism. I'll help A-Tai revitalize his nation, help Qiu Yongsi find his black jiao, and I'll help you find your white deer."

"No, no, Chief," Mergen hurriedly said. "We're practically family. It's not that I can't tell you, but…I'm not sure, myself."

Li Jinglong nodded with a chuckle. "My abilities may be limited, but sometimes I just want to help. Even if I may not be of much assistance."

Mergen smiled too. "They say after every separation you should treat a man like you're meeting him anew. Hongjun has changed you a lot, Chief."

Li Jinglong flushed pink. “What does that have to do with anything? So is it an inheritance or reincarnation?”

“Perhaps it’s reincarnation,” Mergen said, considering. “One of the elders told me the power of transformation doesn’t appear in every generation. It might only surface once every few hundred years.”

“And it only appears within a certain tribe?” Li Jinglong raised an eyebrow.

Mergen thought back with a slight frown. “They say it stays within the Shiwei people.”

“And the white deer is definitely a woman?”

“Historically, all those who have possessed the power of the white deer have been women.”

Li Jinglong pondered this. “Then, when the gray wolf is not incarnated as a human, what form does it take, and where does it go?”

The query stumped Mergen. He had never considered it before. But it was a reasonable question: If the gray wolf and white deer were only reincarnated into human form once every few hundred years, they must have some temple—or perhaps two separate temples—where their spirits resided the rest of the time. It would make no sense for them to simply disappear in the interim.

Li Jinglong’s long, slender fingers stroked the carved stag. “What if, for example, the power of the gray wolf and white deer are stored within a mural when they’re not in human form…and when Mara’s reincarnation draws near, they both find human families to reincarnate into. Would that make sense?”

Mergen hesitated. “That…is only conjecture.”

“The power of the gray wolf went to your family and incarnated into you, so you’re able to use spiritual techniques.”

“Right.” Mergen nodded.

“So let’s say the white deer found a family as well, but was intercepted by a group of yao lying in wait to capture it.”

Mergen was silent.

“I don’t know if this hypothesis makes sense,” Li Jinglong confessed. “After all, I still have very little knowledge of yao and demons. But I’ve heard tales about the cycle of reincarnation from my elders since I was a child.”

Mergen muttered, half to himself, “If the white deer was interrupted in the process of reincarnation…” Alarmed by the implications, he looked up and met Li Jinglong’s eyes.

“My elders said if a spirit was interrupted in the process of reincarnation, its three immortal souls and seven mortal forms would be disordered and incomplete,” Li Jinglong continued. “That person’s mind might be…”

The moment the tattoo artist finished, Mergen dragged on his outer robe, shoved some money into the man’s hand, and sprinted out the door.

Li Jinglong chased after him. “Wait! Liu Fei might know something. Let’s ask him first! Come on!”

They spurred their horses back to the general’s estate.

Hongjun searched for Lu Xu all the way to the city gate. After asking the soldiers stationed there, he discovered Lu Xu had left the city.

Where is he going?!

Hongjun dispatched a message to Li Jinglong and Mergen and set off in pursuit. He could scarcely see a few yards in front of him in the dark, and the snow was a trodden mess underfoot. He happened to run across a patrol, who reported seeing a scout in white running northwestward on foot, out past the outskirts of the capital.

“Where is Lu Xu going?” the carp yao yelled over the rushing wind. “That Mergen must have had his way with him then refused to take responsibility—no wonder he ran. Hongjun, my legs are freezing; I’m going to get frostbite! Put me…”

Their horse, galloping like the wind, leapt over a narrow creek. Hongjun hastily bundled up the carp yao and continued his wild charge.

Li Jinglong and Mergen arrived back at the general's estate, only to hear from a guard that Liu Fei had gone.

"He left?!" Mergen exclaimed.

Li Jinglong assured him it was fine. As soon as Liu Fei had asked Li Jinglong to return his sword that morning, Li Jinglong knew he intended to set out to take back his army.

"Where's Lu Xu?" Mergen rushed off to find him.

They searched the rooms but found them empty. When Mergen returned to ask the guards again, they discovered that Lu Xu was gone as well.

"Gone?! Are you serious?! This is all my fault…" Mergen grabbed for his horse's reins, ready to take off in pursuit.

"Don't panic—calm down!" Li Jinglong called after him.

As Mergen swung astride his horse, he said, "If it was Hongjun who'd run off, I doubt you'd be calm!"

"Right—Hongjun didn't run off!" Li Jinglong said. "Let's ask him what happened first."

They proceeded to search again, this time for Hongjun.

"Exorcist Kong?" the guard asked. "He took off after the idiot."

"Don't panic!" Mergen was the calm one now. "Hongjun's strong. If he's already on the chase, Lu Xu won't get far. We just need to—"

Li Jinglong was already charging into the rear courtyard. Without another word, he leapt astride his horse and left Mergen in the dust.

"Wait up!" Mergen roared after him.

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Chapter 59:
Like a Dream

"LU XU!"

It was long past dark now. Hongjun looked around in confusion. He called Lu Xu's name, but there was no response.

"Lu Xu—!"

"Why don't we head back?" the carp yao coaxed him. "It's so cold."

"We can't! He'll freeze to death out here!" Hongjun fretted. "You're yelling about the cold, but he's not even dressed for the weather. He doesn't have a phoenix feather like I do!"

"Wrap up my legs first, then we can talk!" the carp yao wailed.

"Didn't I do it already?"

"The other one's sticking out!"

Hongjun tucked the carp yao more securely into his arms and looked around. With another flick of the reins, he galloped toward the mountains on the far side of the plain.

Where would Lu Xu go? Lu Xu was on foot in the middle of this snowstorm. He'd freeze to death by dawn.

Hongjun rode northwest until he discovered faint tracks in the snow.

That's him!

Hongjun followed the trail. Lu Xu was on foot, and he was on horseback; by any estimate, Hongjun should have caught up to him within half an hour. But Lu Xu's tracks only continued on, winding toward the edge of the plain with no end in sight.

No way! He was simply too fast. Hongjun chased him for an entire hour, lighting his way with his pentacolor sacred light, only for the trail to suddenly come to an end. He spotted a set of hoofprints snaking over from a different direction, replacing Lu Xu's footprints before taking off into the distance.

Huh? He's riding now?!

Hongjun suddenly recalled that Liu Fei had left around the same time as Lu Xu. Could the hoofprints be from him?

Frigid winds whipped across the frozen landscape as Liu Fei galloped over the plains carrying Lu Xu behind him. He turned his head back to speak. "What business do you have in Dunhuang?"

Lu Xu remained stubbornly silent.

"Go back," Liu Fei said, not for the first time. "Won't that wolf god lad be worried?"

High up on a mountain peak, a woman in black watched them, gazing quietly down at the snowy expanse. A young man stood beside her, clad similarly in black, and followed her gaze. His face was identical to Lu Xu's.

"Can you make Liu Fei sleep a little longer?" the woman asked.

"I cannot," the man said quietly. "He is awake, and I can't get close to him now. We'll have to wait until he falls asleep again. Xuannü, who is that on the back of his horse?"

"I've never seen him before. Perhaps he's the child the plague god described. No matter; let us begin."

The dark lady drew an arc through the air. A snowstorm spun out from her raised, flowing sleeve, a cascade of white that sent the horse and its riders flying. Liu Fei shouted in fury and staggered upright in the snow, brandishing his wind blade.

Turning gracefully, the dark lady sped toward Liu Fei, her long sleeves billowing behind her.

"You!" Liu Fei roared.

The black-clad youth transformed into a stag with an inky-dark coat and bounded across the air toward the snow-covered plain, where Lu Xu had fainted dead away under the force of the raging blizzard. The stag lowered its head; tendrils of black energy emerged from its antlers to tangle around Lu Xu and drag him out of the snow. Shifting back to human form, the young man studied Lu Xu's unconscious figure.

Face to face, they were like a pair of identical twins, their features each an exact reflection of the other.

Li Jinglong and Mergen sped out of the city, holding torches aloft as they galloped along the trail left by Hongjun's horse.

"Hongjun!" Li Jinglong bellowed, "Where are you?!"

Far across the snowy plain, the carp yao had fallen asleep in Hongjun's arms. Hongjun rode the entire night, galloping through the mountains and down to the plains again. Snowdrifts piled high around him, the Milky Way a wide silver river joining the night sky to the sleeping land below, silent as a whisper. The snow had stopped; even the wind had died down. The world was a vast expanse of gray. Hongjun felt as if he was flying through a boundless dreamscape.

A patch of fog rose up before him. Hongjun plunged into it; when he re-emerged, the snowy plain looked like one of Qiu Yongsi's watercolor paintings, with large swaths of white negative space as immaculate as a sheet of fine Xuan paper. The mountains in the distance were like a blotch of blurred ink, so pale as to blend almost completely into the night sky.

The hoofprints on the ground had disappeared.

On the other side of the fog bank was a quiet graveyard. The twinkling stars that studded the heavens gradually faded as he approached a small wooden grave keeper's residence. The door was slightly ajar, lantern light spilling out. Hongjun heard Liu Fei's voice from inside as he led his horse closer.

"Lady Nao always said to me, 'Your Highness, I wish you'd stop killing…'"

Hongjun pushed open the door. A furnace was lit inside, and the room was pleasantly warm. Liu Fei sat on the ground next to a bed in which Lu Xu lay, now dressed entirely in black. Both of them looked up when he entered.

Thank the heavens, I've finally caught up! he thought.

"Hongjun!" Lu Xu cried.

"What are you doing here?" Liu Fei asked, bemused.

Hongjun was too focused on Lu Xu to respond. He sat at the edge of the bed with a frown. “Why did you run off like that?”

Liu Fei answered in his stead. “He was headed northwest like he was searching for something. I gave him a ride. You can bring him back if you like.”

Hongjun thanked Liu Fei, then turned back to Lu Xu. “Where were you going?”

Lu Xu’s expression was gloomy. He pointed northwest. Maybe, Hongjun thought, he wanted to go home—but wasn’t Lu Xu’s home gone? Even if he asked, he would get no response. He had a nagging feeling there was a bigger reason Lu Xu had run out in the middle of the night, but he had no idea what he might have been thinking. He could only hope Mergen and Li Jinglong weren’t far behind; they would get to the bottom of things.

“I’ll go with you tomorrow,” Hongjun said. “Let’s wait and see if the others catch up. The chief and Mergen must be on their way.”

“Can the two of you make do with the bed? I’ll keep watch.” Liu Fei stepped outside.

There were less than two hours till sunrise. After spending the whole night chasing Lu Xu, Hongjun was exhausted. He scooped the carp yao out of his bag, set him down next to the furnace, then climbed into bed himself.

“You led me on a wild goose chase,” Hongjun said. He pressed a hand to Lu Xu’s forehead, then lay down beside him. “Don’t be upset. I don’t know what’s bothering you, but it’ll get better.”

Lu Xu shot a silent glance at Hongjun, still seemingly deep in thought.

Hongjun yawned. He was dead tired, and the snow was coming down in great hypnotic drifts outside. The wind started up again, moaning over the roof of the little wooden house, lulling him to sleep.

White light flashed.

Hongjun found himself back in the Department of Exorcism. The courtyard was overgrown, and Li Jinglong was using the Sword of Wisdom to trace a circle on the ground.

“Don’t lose focus. Keep drawing.”

Hongjun looked around blankly as Li Jinglong took a ladleful of some crimson dye and carefully poured it over the ground.

Out in the wilderness, Li Jinglong scanned the darkened landscape. “Where did they go?”

“Drat,” Mergen said. “It’s snowing.”

Snow fell thickly over the barren plains, obscuring the hoofprints in front of them. They soon lost Hongjun’s trail beneath the shower of powdery white.

Burning with anxiety, Li Jinglong wheeled his horse around and looked out at the surrounding mountain ranges. Mergen dismounted and crouched down on all fours. Shaking himself off, he shifted into his wolf form and sniffed the air.

“Can you catch his scent?”

“He took Zhao Zilong with him,” Mergen said in the wolf’s low growl. “They went this way. Let’s go!”

The furnace burned hot as Hongjun lay on the bed, eyes closed.

“Chouxing,” a familiar male voice was saying. “Wake up.”

Hongjun blinked his eyes open in confusion. He didn’t know how long he had slept, but his whole body ached, and his mouth was dry. He felt feverish, and when he looked around, he saw an incomparably handsome man sitting at the edge of the bed, pressing the back of his hand to Hongjun’s forehead.

Hongjun forgot the snowy night and Lu Xu. He forgot a great number of things as a wild tangle of memories poured into his head and dragged him back to his seventh year.

Pain spiked through his head as he tried to sit up.

“Kong Xuan?” a woman called from outside. “Is Xing-er awake?”

“Xing-er, it’s time for your medicine,” Kong Xuan said to Hongjun.

“Daddy… My head hurts.”

Kong Xuan slid an arm around Hongjun's shoulders and helped him sit. Hongjun's body was limp, so weak he couldn't even lift his arms.

"Drink," Kong Xuan quietly coaxed.

Hongjun's mind felt like a bowl of slush; he had a pounding headache, as if someone was taking a hammer to the inside of his skull. He moaned, "No…"

"You have to take your medicine if you want to get better." Kong Xuan took the bowl, half full of a liquid as bitter as goldthread.

Hongjun steeled himself and drank it. A wave of nausea hit him instantly; he had barely swallowed the medicine when he threw it up again.

"Kong Xuan!" The woman strode inside. "What are you feeding him now?!"

"It's fever-reducing medicine!" Kong Xuan snapped. "If he's still this sick tomorrow, how are we supposed to travel?!"

The woman's beautiful face was wan with exhaustion. She couldn't hold back her tears as she hurried over to pull little Hongjun into her arms; they rolled down her cheeks and dripped onto Hongjun's ear.

Hongjun leaned into her chest, basking in her warmth and soft scent. The memory of this sensation was practically embedded into his bloodstream. Hongjun wailed, "Mommy!"

Holding her son, Jia Yuze burst into sobs. Vexed by their crying, Kong Xuan stood up and yelled, "I get it! I'm useless!"

Hongjun jumped, startled by his shout. Although he'd brought up most of the medicine, the little he'd managed to swallow was having some effect. His head didn't hurt quite so much anymore.

"Where's Jinglong?" Hongjun asked.

"Jinglong heard you were ill and sent a book," Jia Yuze said. "Mommy will bring it to you."

Kong Xuan frowned. "Don't give him that thing."

Jia Yuze walked past Kong Xuan without so much as a glance in his direction, picked up the book, and set it down at Hongjun's bedside. The volume was new, with no signs of wear on its pages. Jia Yuze sat back on

the bed and said quietly, “Mommy has to pack our things. If you’re tired, go to sleep. Be a good boy.”

Hesitantly, Hongjun opened his mouth. “Daddy, I dreamed of a bunch of graves.”

“It was just a dream.” Kong Xuan was still frowning. “Don’t be afraid. Daddy has some work to do.”

His parents stepped outside and closed the door behind them.

Hongjun flipped through the book, confusion written over his face. The last page bore an ink painting of a dark shadow, underscored by a caption: *Mara*.

The door swung open again, and Kong Xuan slipped in. The young Hongjun looked up as he sat at his bedside.

“Can you read it?”

Hongjun hummed a quiet affirmation.

“Don’t read this one. It’s not a good book.” Kong Xuan handed Hongjun a chunk of rock sugar. “Here.”

Hongjun grinned at the treat and popped it into his mouth. Kong Xuan patted his head and pecked him on the forehead. A jade peacock feather hung at his father’s waist—the same one present-day Hongjun now wore. He stretched out a hand to touch it.

Kong Xuan suddenly pulled him into his arms and held him tight. He broke down in sobs, frantically running his hands over Hongjun’s hair and cheeks before pressing a firm kiss to his brow. His voice was barely audible as he said, “Xing-er, Daddy is so sorry…”

“What’s wrong, Daddy?” Hongjun asked.

Kong Xuan let out a slow breath, then closed his eyes and shook his head, seeming to gather himself. He rose and left again.

It was stuffy both inside and out of the house this evening, the summer air heavy with the threat of rain that refused to fall. Hongjun slid off the bed and swayed on his feet, stumbling as if he stepped on soft cotton as his head spun. He pushed open the door and emerged into the twilight to find the familiar sounds of a Chang’an evening—the clack of a watchman’s

clapper and the clop of the man's wooden clogs on stone. Not far away, Jia Yuze's voice was pitched high in rage—his parents seemed to be arguing. Hongjun tiptoed over on bare feet.

"I don't *know* who's been leaking information to them!" Kong Xuan said, low and urgent. "Don't yell; Xing-er will hear!"

"Where are we supposed to go now?" Jia Yuze snapped.

The courtyard was piled high with wooden crates and parcels of all sizes, as if they were in the middle of moving house.

Kong Xuan sat down heavily on a crate and sighed. "I'll bring him back to Yaojin Palace. Chong Ming won't turn us away."

"Your brothers only care about *you*," Jia Yuze sobbed. "Kong Xuan, have they ever felt a shred of pity toward me or my son? If I hadn't shielded Xing-er with my own body when he was born, would he still be here today?!"

"Stop dredging up old arguments!" Kong Xuan retorted. "That was then, this is now! I'll send a letter to Yaojin Palace tonight. Dage won't stand by and watch Xing-er be killed."

"What is that thing inside him?!" Jia Yuze stepped forward so that their faces were inches apart. Her hair was disheveled, and her entire body trembled with emotion as she demanded, "Tell me the *truth*, Kong Xuan. I heard them say you transferred the demon seed in your own body to our son. Is that true?! You used your own son as a sacrifice to save yourself?!"

Kong Xuan stared into Jia Yuze's eyes. "Yuze, I swear, if I ever had a single thought like that, let me suffer eternal torment in the depths of hell! I'd rather burn in its dark fires for a million years!"

Jia Yuze buried her face in her hands, stumbling as she shook with sobs. Kong Xuan stood up and wrapped his arms around her.

"Dage and Erge will come for us," Kong Xuan said.

"No! No, they won't!" Jia Yuze cried. "If they cared, they wouldn't have sat idly by and let you get hurt—they wouldn't have let them steal Xing-er away again and again. I wish I were a yao. If I had that kind of power, I would *never* let Xing-er live like this, even if I burnt myself to a crisp—"

“Yuze, stop.” Kong Xuan’s voice had turned pleading. “Will you only be satisfied once I die in front of you? In front of our son?”

“What use would that be?! I just want him to live a happy life, like any child. What harm has Xing-er done? Tell me, what is this demon seed inside him?”

“Don’t ask,” Kong Xuan said. “We’ll set out first thing in the morning. We’ll leave Chang’an, even if we have to go to Gua Prefecture and seek shelter with your brother.”

“They follow us wherever we go,” Jia Yuze said. “The yaoguai are everywhere, trying to snatch Xing-er away with their claws and fangs…”

Outside the room, Hongjun staggered back half a step, his eyes wide with fear. He fled back down the corridor and stood in the rear courtyard, his thin underrobe soaked through with sweat.

A large seedpod suddenly clipped the back of his head. Hongjun turned and saw a half-grown youth in an embroidered robe sitting atop the wall, staring at him with curious eyes under the moonlight.

“Xing, are you better now?” the youth whispered down to Hongjun. “Why do you look so pale?”

Hongjun didn’t know what to do. As the shock faded, the words he’d overheard hit him in a wave of pain and sorrow. He couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down his face. This dreamscape—or memory—was too realistic; he had no resistance against it.

“Hey, don’t cry!” the youth blurted. “What’s wrong? Your dad’s going to whoop you again.”

He slid down the wall and ran barefoot over to Hongjun, getting down on one knee to peer into his face.

This nine-year-old youth was luxuriously dressed, but his face bore red marks from being lashed with a bamboo broom. He wiped Hongjun’s cheeks with his sleeve as Hongjun gaped at him through his tear-blurred vision. Those eyes, that nose, those lips…

“Jinglong,” Hongjun said.

“Call me Gege.” Nine-year-old Li Jinglong took his hand. “Let’s go.”

Li Jinglong led him through the courtyard and into the garden, which was separated from the Li family's home by a simple fence. He boosted Hongjun over, then scaled it himself. The pair wound their way down a corridor and into the Li family's rear courtyard, which was shaded by the boughs of a tall pomegranate tree.

Li Jinglong's home was large, and a pair of wooden clogs and a weiqi board sat beside the corridor. A child's outer robe was tossed beside these, and a green, unripe pomegranate lay at the edge of the game board. Li Jinglong shook out the outer robe and helped Hongjun into the sleeves—both the robe and the shoes were slightly too large on him.

Still leading Hongjun by the hand, he brought him into the lavishly furnished house and got him a piece of cake. They had played a game of weiqi together earlier that very day; Hongjun had only fallen ill after he went home.

Li Jinglong pressed a hand to Hongjun's forehead, then made him a cup of honeyed water. "You don't have a fever at all."

Each time the family moved, Jia Yuze made a point of forbidding Hongjun from playing with the neighborhood children. He had no choice but to spend his days sitting around at home. It was Li Jinglong who had spotted the child one day, shut inside by himself. Feeling sorry for him, he had scaled the wall to introduce himself, and this was how he and Hongjun had met.

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Chapter 60:
The Darkest Nightmare

"LI JINGLONG!" a man's gruff voice shouted. "Where have you run off to this time?" A series of hacking coughs followed.

"I'm here, I'm here!" Li Jinglong hurriedly called out.

The two children sat side by side in the corridor, sweltering in the stifling heat.

"I have to go," Hongjun said.

"Go?" For a moment, Li Jinglong didn't grasp his full meaning.

"We're moving," Hongjun said glumly.

"But I haven't learned any spiritual techniques yet!" Li Jinglong grew upset as well. "You promised to teach me!"

Hongjun looked up at Li Jinglong with guilt in his eyes. As far back as he could remember, his parents had moved every year. They'd left Huayin for Luoyang when he was four, then moved from Luoyang to Xiangyang when he was five, Shandong when he was six, and Chang'an when he was seven. In each new city, his mother would repeatedly warn him not to play with other children. Hongjun spent every day cooped up at home, flipping through his father's medical texts. The young Li Jinglong was the first friend he'd made after coming to Chang'an last year—the only friend he'd ever had.

"Moving where?" Li Jinglong probed. "I'll tell my dad to move too. We can go together!"

Afraid to look at Li Jinglong, Hongjun scuffed at the ground with his toes. "There's a monster inside my body."

Li Jinglong went silent.

Hongjun turned toward him. "They want to kill me."

"Who does?"

Hongjun shook his head. He didn't know either. He only knew that his dad was constantly injured, and his mom always hugged him and cried. His family had suffered countless sleepless nights because of him.

"I'm a living symbol of misfortune," Hongjun said. "If the monster inside me comes alive, you'll die too."

Li Jinglong watched Hongjun, quiet. The seven-year-old was abnormally calm as he said, "I won't forget you, Li Jinglong."

With that, Hongjun got up to leave. Li Jinglong called after him: "I'll wait for you outside Jincheng Ward tomorrow evening! Let's see each other one more time before you go."

Hongjun was caught off guard. He gazed back at Li Jinglong; after a long pause, he said, "I'll return your book then."

He scurried away and hopped the fence, only faltering when he heard Li Jinglong shout from the other side, "Hongjun!"

Hongjun stopped in place for a moment, caught by a rising panic. As he hurried back to his room, he was blinded by a flash of lightning.

"Hongjun!"

He scanned his surroundings as the scenery transformed around him once again. He found himself in a little alley, the memories of his sixteen-year-old self flooding back into him. He clutched his borrowed book as voices shouted from all around, "Hongjun! Hongjun!"

Lightning flashed again and again. From up ahead, the nine-year-old Li Jinglong yelled, "*Hongjun!*"

Hongjun took off toward him at a run. Li Jinglong was waiting for him deeper inside the alley.

"Li Jinglong?"

Li Jinglong reached for Hongjun's hand, but with a sudden pulse of fear, Hongjun backed out of range.

"Trust me, Hongjun! When have I ever lied to you?! Come with me!"

Li Jinglong grabbed his wrist and dragged him down to the end of the alley, where a wooden door stood ajar. Li Jinglong slammed it open and dragged Hongjun through into an overgrown courtyard.

“This is…” Hongjun began. “Li Jinglong! What are you doing?”

Lightning flashed overhead, and Hongjun slowed, realizing the building Li Jinglong had led him to was the outer courtyard of the Department of Exorcism. In the center of the space, an array pulsed with golden light.

The instant he stepped into the courtyard, a forest of gilded rays flared up, trapping him with a low hum.

“Let me out!” Hongjun shouted, tossing the book aside.

The young Li Jinglong stood in the entrance hall, a gleaming warrior in golden armor behind him.

“I brought him.” Li Jinglong panted heavily for breath. “That’s him!”

“You tricked me!” Hongjun screamed.

The warrior spoke in a low, time-weathered voice. “Demon seed, you are the cause of the coming calamity. Even if I must slaughter an innocent, I will end your life here and now…”

The warrior raised his golden sword, and pure white flame burst from the array with a roar.

Hongjun hurled his body against the bars of light summoned by the array. “Li Jinglong!”

Time seemed to speed its flow. Li Jinglong’s figure stretched taller, while Hongjun’s grew smaller. He stared at his hands in astonishment as they shrank to the size they were when he was four, then rapidly grew until he returned to his sixteen-year-old self.

“Li Jinglong!” Hongjun shouted.

The flames of the array flickered in Li Jinglong’s eyes. Wisps of black energy emerged from Hongjun’s body as he shrieked madly in pain, his flesh burned away by golden flames until gouts of blood ran down to pool on the ground. He was flayed raw, more blood than skin.

“Li Jinglong…” A growl rumbled deep in Hongjun’s throat. A massive black flame erupted from Hongjun’s heart, while the warrior in his gilt armor retracted his pointing sword. Five more glowing spiritual devices

appeared until six hovered in the air, orbiting around him. They spun faster and faster, merging until they transformed into an enormous bow.

The golden-armored warrior floated toward Li Jinglong. With a deafening thrum, he and Li Jinglong merged into one.

“Mommy… Daddy…” Hongjun knelt within the array, his face nearly burnt away by the flames. A terrible wail tore from his throat. “Help me… I… It hurts…”

Shaking, Li Jinglong drew the bow and took aim at Hongjun inside the array, now back in his child form.

The door of the Department of Exorcism exploded inward. Moving too fast to see, Kong Xuan charged into the array. He threw himself in front of the golden warrior’s arrow in the moment it left the string, spinning as it streaked toward them.

Kong Xuan raised the pentacolor sacred light, but the bright arrow tore through his shield like paper and buried itself in his chest.

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Jia Yuze, a step behind, rushed into the array, her hair loose and wild, and wrapped her arms around Hongjun's body—burnt black as coal—with a heartrending wail.

Sparing not a glance for the arrow embedded in his own flesh, Kong Xuan launched himself at his attacker. "Di Renjie!"

Tears streamed down Jia Yuze's cheeks as she held Hongjun in her arms and stroked his face. "Xing-er…don't be afraid," she murmured. "It'll be all right… Everything will be all right…"

"Mommy… It hurts…" Hongjun trembled. The corners of his mouth had split; he spat out a mouthful of bloody foam as more blood flooded up to clog his throat.

"In just a moment, it won't hurt anymore." Jia Yuze muttered, "Ignite my immortal soul, dispel my mortal forms…"

Hongjun's body shrank until he was once again no bigger than a four-year-old. Jia Yuze closed her eyes; a tear slid down her cheek. As she recited the words of the incantation, one of her hands glowed green. She pressed it to Hongjun's face, and his skin rapidly healed over, regenerating at a rate visible to the naked eye. The charred black outer layer peeled off like snake shed to reveal unblemished flesh beneath. As her incantation took effect, Jia Yuze's waterfall of dark hair went snow-white; when she looked up again, her face was that of an old woman.

"Di Renjie," Jia Yuze sobbed. "Spare my Xing-er, please. What harm has he done?!"

Still impaled on that bright golden arrow, Kong Xuan struggled to his feet only to nearly collapse to his knees again. Jia Yuze took his elbow, and they both knelt before Li Jinglong.

Kong Xuan's voice trembled. "Di Renjie, he's the only child I have…"

Dragging his now-oversized clothes behind him, Hongjun looked up at the warrior brandishing the Sword of Wisdom in fear.

"Mommy… Daddy…" Hongjun knelt with them, voice unsteady in his newly healed throat. He slowly looked up, eyes dead as burnt-out ash as he stared at Li Jinglong above them.

Li Jinglong raised a shaking hand, white light burning in his palm.

“Daddy—!” Hongjun wailed. Black energy erupted from him again, demonic shadows rising from the ground as waves of darkness roiled in every direction, leveling the city of Chang’an.

The Department of Exorcism, Jincheng Ward, Chang’an—the entirety of the Central Plains—collapsed. All living creatures were enveloped in the maelstrom of dark energy.

Li Jinglong shouted furiously into the eye of the storm. “Hongjun!”

The seething tide threatened to crush all of reality. Li Jinglong raised the Sword of Wisdom in his right hand as his left palm flared white, cleaving through heaven and earth.

“Wake up!” Li Jinglong yelled. He pulled Hongjun into his arms, rays of white light shooting in all directions and seeping through Hongjun’s body. Hongjun felt as if his very soul was aflame under that searing beam of light. He felt like he was burning again; he thrashed in Li Jinglong’s hold. “Let me go!”

“He’s awake!” Mergen was shouting somewhere out of sight. “Chief! He’s awake!”

The light dimmed, and Hongjun’s surroundings went dark. His ears rang as if a thunderclap had sounded inches away from his head, but he could feel Li Jinglong’s arms tight around him. He realized he held a throwing knife in each hand. Hongjun tipped his head back toward the sky and blinked.

The winter light of the Milky Way reflected in his eyes. When he craned his head backward, he saw Mergen panting for breath as he stood in the snow, covered in bleeding wounds. Li Jinglong looked similarly ragged, blood splashed across his face even as he continued to hold Hongjun with no sign of letting go.

The icy ground and the graveyard around them were littered with collapsed corpse ghosts and their horses. Liu Fei lay on the ground a short distance away, and the little house had been leveled. A spreading patch of purple-black blood pooled around the spot where Li Jinglong and Hongjun stood in the snow.

“You lied to me,” Hongjun muttered before collapsing unconscious into Li Jinglong’s arms.

Mergen carried Li Jinglong and Liu Fei on his back in his wolf form, Li Jinglong still clutching Hongjun’s limp body. They loped toward the end of the valley.

Along the bumpy ride, Hongjun had a long, long dream. He dreamed of a young Li Jinglong chasing after his carriage to see him off, pressing a book into his hands with a paper packet stuffed between its pages.

“The pomegranates haven’t ripened yet,” Li Jinglong called. “Plant the seeds in the courtyard of your new house!”

Hongjun stuck his head out the window, tears streaming down his face. “Let’s meet again, Li Jinglong!”

Li Jinglong stood at the end of the alley, scrubbing at his eyes. “Wait until I learn spiritual techniques! I’ll come find you!”

“Chouxing?” a man’s voice called in his ear.

Hongjun gradually awakened to find that he seemed to have returned to the bedroom from his dream. He stared blankly at the person sitting at his bedside, fingers unconsciously questing for something in the soft, warm blankets covering his body.

“You’re awake?” the man asked, then turned to someone else in the room. “He’s awake! Get Chief Li!”

“Where am I?” Hongjun raised an arm, looking down to check if his body had changed again. Seeing he seemed to be back to normal, he asked, “Am I still dreaming?”

The man’s face was vaguely familiar. He peered down at Hongjun, confused. “Chouxing… I’m your uncle—your mother’s brother.”

Li Jinglong nearly slammed the door off its hinges as he rushed inside. “Hongjun?”

Mergen tumbled in after him, the carp yao on their heels, wailing, “Hongjun! Are you all right?!”

“What happened?” Hongjun’s head had begun to throb again. “Where am I?”

Mergen pressed a hand to Hongjun’s forehead and muttered an incantation under his breath. Hongjun’s headache ebbed away. Li Jinglong reached out as well—but with that dream still fresh in his mind, Hongjun shied away, his eyes shaded with fear.

“Chouxing,” his uncle said, “do you remember me? It’s me, Jia Zhou.”

Hongjun stared at the man. He didn’t remember him, but his face resembled his mother’s, whom he had just seen in the dream.

“Do you remember *me*?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun nodded, then turned to Mergen and nodded again.

The carp yao poked his head into their circle. “What about me?”

Hongjun was now certain he was no longer dreaming. He rapped the carp yao on the head with a knuckle, and the fish darted up onto the bed with him. Hongjun continued to eye his newfound uncle.

“Do you remember him?” Li Jinglong asked. “He’s the Governor of Gua Prefecture, Jia Zhou—your mother Jia Yuze’s elder brother.”

“But you look so young,” Jia Zhou was saying. “Xing-er, shouldn’t you be nineteen this year? How strange, you and Kong Xuan could be cast from the same mold…” Jia Zhou let out a laugh.

Hongjun remembered now. Yang Yuhuan had told him in the carriage after the fox yao case that his mother had a brother who was still alive. His grandfather had once been the deputy military governor of Hexi, and his maternal family had remained there.

“You and my mother…look a lot alike.” Hongjun examined Jia Zhou’s face, the faintly creased visage of a man in his forties. His uncle smiled and wiped a tear from his cheek. He took Hongjun’s hand into his own rough palm, covered in a thin layer of calluses from a soldier’s training.

“Why did you wait so long to visit?” Jia Zhou asked. “Who raised you after your parents died? When I heard your parents were gone, I sent people to search…”

Hongjun paled. He stared into space for a moment, then looked up at Li Jinglong. Sensing something was off, Li Jinglong asked, “What is it?”

Hongjun had no idea what to say.

“He must be tired,” Mergen said. “Come on, we should let him get some rest.”

The carp yao was still studying Hongjun. “He’s too pale.”

“We’ll let you catch up with your uncle,” Li Jinglong said. “Hongjun, take it easy. If you need anything, come get me anytime. I’m staying in the east wing.”

Hongjun said nothing. Li Jinglong gave Jia Zhou a look and received a nod in response before leaving the room with Mergen.

“I’ll be quiet,” Zhao Zilong said. “Just pretend I’m not here.” The carp yao flopped off the bed into the corner of the room, where he slipped into a wooden basin of water.

Hongjun and Jia Zhou were finally left alone again. When Hongjun tried to get out of bed, Jia Zhou stopped him. “Don’t be in such a hurry. You haven’t eaten in days.”

Jia Zhou stepped out to ask a servant for a bowl of congee, then personally brought it to Hongjun’s bedside when it arrived. “You know, I was the one who picked your name.” Jia Zhou spooned up some of the porridge and held it to Hongjun’s lips.

“I can do it myself,” Hongjun interjected.

“Careful, it’s hot.”

Hongjun took the bowl, the dream still playing through his head. It was impossible for him to see his uncle, whose features so resembled his mother’s, and not recall those visions of the past or the warmth of his mother’s embrace.

After gulping down the congee, he finally felt some strength return. Watching Jia Zhou, he said, “My mother was Jia Yuze.”

“And your father was Kong Xuan.” Jia Zhou smiled. “A legendary doctor who could practically reverse the ravages of time. He selflessly treated the people of the world.”

Hongjun exhaled softly and groped along the side of the bed. Jia Zhou retrieved the jade peacock feather from beneath the pillow. “Your chief brought you to Yumen Pass and sent someone to ask after—”

“We’re at Yumen Pass?” Hongjun was astounded. “That far? I chased Lu Xu all night, but there’s no way I made it even as far as Zhangye…”

“You seemed to have encountered quite a lot of trouble along the way,” Jia Zhou said. “Don’t worry; we’ll take things one step at a time.”

A light rap sounded on the door—a messenger had come bearing a military report. Jia Zhou rose, saying he would return to keep Hongjun company once he was free again.

Back in his room in the east wing, Li Jinglong tried to lie down, gritting his teeth against a sudden spike of pain as he bent at the waist. Mergen sat at the desk and gazed out at the snow drifting through the courtyard.

“Something’s off about Hongjun,” Li Jinglong said. “The way he looked at me, it was like he was still in the middle of a nightmare.”

“I already woke him from his nightmares. At least you found him. We still have no idea where Lu Xu went,” Mergen fretted.

“Jia Zhou’s scouts have cast their net, and Liu Fei is searching too. He’ll be all right.”

“What happened that night?” Mergen asked. “Zhao Zilong won’t give me a straight answer.”

“We’d have to ask Hongjun.”

“Then why won’t you let me?”

“Are you insane?!” Li Jinglong fumed.

Mergen shut his mouth. Hongjun had only just recovered, and he still seemed disoriented. They couldn’t push him too hard right now—but with Lu Xu missing, Mergen couldn’t stand to sit still.

“Why haven’t you gone to search for him yourself?” Li Jinglong snapped. “Is there anything else you want to put on my shoulders while we’re at it?”

Li Jinglong felt like the Department of Exorcism's single parent. Mergen was two years older than him, yet he had to wait for Li Jinglong's orders to act.

"What happened to Hongjun?" Li Jinglong frowned.

"He's half yao," Mergen said. "There's some kind of malevolent energy inside him. I don't know if his adoptive father sealed it before or what." He got to his feet and began to pace up and down the room. "The way he was attacking everyone, friend and foe alike, it seemed like he was trapped in a nightmare."

"Can you see into his dreams?" Li Jinglong asked.

Mergen shook his head. "I can only awaken him from them. The only one who could send him to sleep and enter his dreams is the white deer."

In his own room, Hongjun set Zhao Zilong's basin on the table and took a seat before it. "What happened on the way here?"

"Hongjun," the carp yao said, "do you really remember nothing?"

"Hurry up and tell me." Hongjun frowned, watching him.

Zhao Zilong hesitated. "All right. But the chief told me not to tell you, in case you…"

"I won't say a word."

Affecting an air of mystery, the carp yao placed his hands on the edge of the basin and peeked his head out of the water as he began to tell the tale.

That night, Hongjun had followed Lu Xu and Liu Fei to a graveyard. He and the carp yao had entered the house they found there to rest for the night. Zhao Zilong hadn't noticed anything amiss at the time. But at some point in the middle of the night, Hongjun got to his feet and dragged himself to the middle of the graveyard as if sleepwalking.

By the time Li Jinglong and Mergen caught up, Hongjun was jerking like a puppet on strings, black energy rolling from his body in waves. He had lashed out at Li Jinglong and Mergen without hesitation. Lu Xu, dressed head to toe in black, had hung in the air behind Hongjun, thousands

of silk threads extending from his hands as he directed Hongjun's every movement.

Liu Fei, standing guard outside the little house, had warped into a woman in dark robes with a pitch-black void for a face. When Li Jinglong and Mergen rushed forward to help Hongjun and Lu Xu, she summoned frigid winds and swirling snow, calling down a storm that engulfed both the graveyard and the surrounding plain.

"That was the dark lady, the other yaoguai?" Hongjun asked.

"I… I'm not sure," Zhao Zilong said.

Mergen and Li Jinglong had fumbled forward, struggling against the blizzard. But the dark lady's winter storm was too powerful; they couldn't get anywhere near her. Spikes of ice and pelting snow flew through the air, while Hongjun hacked down anything that approached like a demon lord wreaking havoc across the snowy landscape.

They were only saved when the real Liu Fei appeared and raised the soldiers sleeping in the graveyard with his wind blade. Heedless of the frostbite gnawing at his skin, Mergen had put all his strength into a single assault on the dark lady, forcing the injured snow yao to retreat. As soon as she was gone, Li Jinglong broke Lu Xu's control over Hongjun using the heart lamp.

Hongjun abruptly recalled the flashes of thunderless lightning that had lit up his dreams. Perhaps those had actually been the light of the heart lamp. "And then what happened?"

"Lu Xu disappeared," the carp yao said. "He even spat a barb at us as he went."

Hongjun's eyes went wide.

"Before he left, he said this: 'One day, you will die at his hands. The demon seed is found. What awaits you is naught but suffering.'"

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Chapter 61:
Rising Suspicion

HONGJUN'S BREATHING quickened, eyes round and wide in his pale face.

"Don't take it to heart, Hongjun," Zhao Zilong said quickly. "That might not have even been the real Lu Xu."

After a bitter struggle, Li Jinglong had finally managed to wake Hongjun, and Mergen transformed into the gray wolf and carried them all off toward the northwest. Zhao Zilong and Mergen had intended to look for a doctor nearby, but Li Jinglong recalled that Hongjun mentioned having family in Gua Prefecture.

"Why does that matter?" Hongjun interjected.

"Mergen told him nightmares retreat near family and lovers. And just as he said, you woke up the day after we came to Yumen."

Hongjun recalled how he'd slept without dreams after waking up beside his uncle. "But what about Lu Xu?"

Zhao Zilong hesitated. "The chief thinks the yao captured him and did something to change him."

Hongjun stared in shock.

"Wasn't he wearing all black when you met him in the graveyard?"

Hongjun remembered now—the guards at the city gate had described Lu Xu as wearing white when he left. But he typically kept two sets of scout's robes on him, one white and one black, so this didn't necessarily prove anything. "Then, Liu Fei was also…"

"Remember, I said nothing!" Zhao Zilong waved his hands. "Nothing at all!"

At some point, Liu Fei, with Lu Xu riding behind him, must have been ambushed. Lu Xu had been captured by the dark lady, who had then used Lu Xu's powers to control Hongjun.

Hongjun finally dug out the key piece among all these fragmented bits of information: “Lu Xu is the white deer?!” he exclaimed, almost shouting.

The carp yao neither confirmed nor denied, retreating quietly back into his basin. Hongjun’s head was spinning. If Lu Xu was the white deer Mergen had been searching for all this time… But then, how had the yaoguai turned him against them?

“Hongjun?” Li Jinglong was at the door. “Are you feeling better?”

The sound of Li Jinglong’s voice immediately brought back the pain Hongjun had suffered in his dream.

Li Jinglong stepped into the room and knelt in front of Hongjun where he sat on the bed, looking him over in worry. “What did you dream about in that graveyard?”

Even Hongjun couldn’t guess how much of the dream had been real. What if everything he’d seen was a fabrication—merely a vision the dark Lu Xu had placed in his mind to control him? His head was an utter mess.

“Didn’t I tell you not to bother Hongjun?” Zhao Zilong huffed.

Li Jinglong’s brow crinkled. “I was worried!”

In truth, Li Jinglong was hurting all over. Hongjun had done a number on him with his throwing knives, but all the bandages were hidden under his clothes. Constant pain would make anyone irritable, and his words took on a sharper edge than intended.

“Jinglong,” Hongjun suddenly said. “When you were little…did you live in Fuxing Ward?”

Li Jinglong’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Did I mention that? Yes, near Chongfu Temple.”

Hongjun observed Li Jinglong’s face as he said experimentally, “There was a pomegranate tree in your courtyard.”

“How did you know?” Li Jinglong smiled. “Did you dream of me as a child?”

Hongjun’s heart plummeted. “Do you remember something that happened when you were nine years old?”

Li Jinglong frowned. “Hongjun, what did you see in your dream?”

“Answer me, Jinglong,” Hongjun insisted.

Li Jinglong looked at him in confusion. Hongjun had changed since he had fallen under Lu Xu’s control. Something seemed to weigh heavily on his mind; he was no longer as carefree as he had been.

“Mergen and I think Lu Xu is probably the white deer, the god with the power to walk in dreams,” Li Jinglong explained. “But after the yao took him, he’s no longer the Lu Xu we know.”

Hongjun hummed in acknowledgment. “We’re going to save him, right?”

“When you’re better.” Hongjun had been avoiding Li Jinglong’s eyes, but Li Jinglong’s gaze never strayed from his face. “Under the yao’s control, Lu Xu’s black energy can trap people in nightmares, but the things they see aren’t real. Hongjun, tell me—what did you see?”

“Jinglong,” Hongjun said. “There’s a monster inside me.”

Startled, Li Jinglong blurted, “Who told you what happened?!”

“I said nothing!” The carp yao immediately swore his innocence.

“It’s right here.” Hongjun pointed at his own heart. “It has nothing to do with Zhao Zilong. I realized it myself.”

“That was only a dream,” Li Jinglong said. “A dream, Hongjun!” Hongjun’s chest worked violently as he sucked in air. “Trust me. There’s no monster inside you! Hongjun!”

He caught Hongjun’s wrist. Before Hongjun could throw him off, a warm, radiant energy flowed into his meridians and circulated through his body. The light glowing in Li Jinglong’s palm washed through him, calling up joyful memories—early autumn in the Department of Exorcism, the parasol tree rustling in the warm sunlight; hot springs burbling in a snowy valley, drifting snowflakes melting away as they touched the steaming waters of the pool.

Gradually, Hongjun’s breathing evened. Li Jinglong said earnestly, “Don’t overthink it, all right?”

Hongjun nodded, and Li Jinglong let go.

After a spell, he said, “When I was nine, my father passed away, and I fell very ill. Most of my memories of that year are blurry, and I don’t remember much before then. But if you’re asking, I’ll try my best to recall them. Now it’s your turn, though, Hongjun. What did you see in your dream? Did it have to do with your parents’ deaths?”

Hongjun’s heart constricted. He stared wide-eyed at Li Jinglong and said nothing.

Li Jinglong’s eyes flickered with uncertainty and unease. “You can trust me, Hongjun.”

Abruptly, Hongjun recalled the image of Li Jinglong holding the Sword of Wisdom as he was possessed by that golden warrior. His eyes had looked just as they did now: pained, guilty, sorrowful, and full of anxiety.

Hongjun hesitated until Jia Zhou appeared and knocked at the cracked-open door. “Sorry to interrupt. Chouxing, would you all like to join me for dinner?”

Jia Zhou’s wife had passed twelve years ago after a miscarriage that took the lives of both mother and child. He had gone many years without seeking a second wife, and he had no wish to return to the Central Plains. With no children of his own at his knee, he couldn’t hide his excitement upon being reunited with his nephew. He seemed to have many things he wanted to say but had been restraining himself out of consideration for Hongjun, who had only just woken and was still in recovery.

That evening, over their meal, Jia Zhou smiled at Hongjun. “It’s been so many years.”

There weren’t many people in this world bored enough to seek out random relatives for fun. When Hongjun had first laid eyes on Jia Zhou, his heart had indeed filled with emotion, but the complicated circumstances behind their reunion had dulled his joy.

“You’ve come all this way to Hexi, and you even brought gifts,” Jia Zhou said.

Gifts? At his confused look, Li Jinglong reminded him, “We bought them in the market in Chang’an. Have you already forgotten?”

Hongjun had. Before they'd departed, Li Jinglong bought cakes of tea, some rouge, silk, and a pearl hairpin. Zhao Zilong had quipped at the time that he was preparing to cross-dress.

"Unfortunately, your aunt passed some years ago," Jia Zhou said. "I'll bring you to see her in a few days. We can burn these as an offering."

Hongjun nodded. "Birth, age, illness, and death; the cycle of growth and decay; all of these are the will of heaven. We will meet again someday." Chong Ming had once said these very words to him as a child. He hadn't understood them then, but he did now.

Jia Zhou smiled. "You remind me so much of your father. He was a famous doctor, you know. I never thought you'd grow up to become an exorcist of all things. What kinds of concoctions was he feeding you to nurture such an extraordinary talent?"

"It was my father's brother who took me in and taught me spiritual techniques to banish evil," Hongjun said.

Jia Zhou nodded. "Years ago, Kong Xuan demonstrated some of his skills when he helped me defeat a monster—"

Li Jinglong had only been half listening to their conversation, too busy observing the expression on Hongjun's face. It was Mergen who cut in. "What kind of monster?"

Jia Zhou took a moment to sort through his recollections. "I don't remember exactly. A group of soldiers had murdered each other in Yardang. Kong Xuan believed it was a yao's doing, so he went personally to confront the creature. No such incident occurred after—that is, until the massacres this year. After that, Kong Xuan never came here again. To think you would appear in his place!"

Jia Zhou had a weary look about him. He had spent years guarding the border pass without promotion, all because his father—Hongjun's grandfather—was once the deputy military governor. When Geshu Han had been appointed Duke of Liang, he had brought his own people, and the officers of the previous administrations had either retired to the countryside or transferred to the capital. Only Jia Zhou had stayed behind to guard Yumen Pass. Geshu Han respected his military abilities but was unwilling to promote him. Fortunately, Jia Zhou was a man of little ambition to begin

with; he planned to live out the rest of his life here, keeping the memory of his deceased wife alive.

“Uncle, the chief will take care of things. Don’t worry.”

“Chouxing, tell me honestly,” Jia Zhou said. “Do you really want to be an exorcist? Have you no other way to make a living?”

Caught off guard, Hongjun had no ready response. The furrows in Li Jinglong’s brow grew deeper.

Jia Zhou turned to Li Jinglong. “I don’t know about the Kong family, but after all these years, Chouxing is the Jia family’s only descendant.”

Li Jinglong and Jia Zhou were technically of the same rank, both military officials of Great Tang. By unwritten agreement, however, military officials serving along the border were treated as a half step above their capital counterparts in hierarchy. Although Jia Zhou had been impeccably polite, his attitude regarding Hongjun was obvious.

“You roam the land capturing yao and fighting battles,” Jia Zhou said, “but I don’t see any reason you need my nephew along with you. I don’t know what kind of monster you encountered, but he’s so ill now, and he nearly died on the way here. Li Jinglong, why don’t I write to the crown prince and beg him to do an old man a favor and let Xing-er stay in Yumen to recuperate?”

Li Jinglong frowned. Had anyone else suggested such a thing, he would have snapped back, *Sole descendant of your family or not, Hongjun is my brother, too!* But if he claimed Hongjun as his brother, that made Jia Zhou his uncle, and he couldn’t politely contradict his elder.

“We should leave it up to Hongjun,” Li Jinglong finally said.

“I can’t,” Hongjun said. “I have to rescue Lu Xu.”

“We can discuss this more later,” Jia Zhou said. “Think of your father and mother. Your mother wanted you all to have a peaceful life. You wouldn’t want your future wife to spend her days running to and fro, would you? If your parents had listened to me, you wouldn’t have been orphaned, and you wouldn’t be on your own now. Think of your future children.”

Although Jia Zhou had expressed respect for Kong Xuan on several occasions, it wasn’t difficult for Hongjun to read between the lines: His

uncle blamed his father for his mother's death.

"Uncle," Hongjun said abruptly. "What happened back then had nothing to do with my father. He treated my mother very well, and he loved me too. I was the one who caused my parents' deaths."

Everyone blanched. Mergen looked shocked, and Li Jinglong furiously snapped, "Hongjun! What are you saying?!"

Only now did Jia Zhou catch a glimpse of how much his young nephew had on his shoulders, what darkness lurked in his heart, and how he longed for salvation.

"How could you believe that?" Jia Zhou set down his chopsticks and came around to Hongjun's side of the table, pulling Hongjun into an embrace. "Your mother always said you were the best thing in her life. I don't know how exactly they met their end. But you must remember that life and death are the will of heaven, just as you said. Their fates had run their course; what's done is done. It had nothing to do with you, nor was it your fault."

Hongjun's complicated jumble of emotions nearly came pouring out of him in a great wave. He silently dabbed at his tears with the edge of his sleeve, swallowing back a sob. Jia Zhou shot a reproachful glance at Li Jinglong. But despite Li Jinglong's mounting anxiety, he had no idea what to do.

That night, Li Jinglong stood in the outdoor corridor looking up at a sky the grim color of an oncoming snowstorm.

"Once the dark lady withdraws her power, the blizzard stops—this is just normal snow," Li Jinglong said. "You must have done a number on her."

"I'm worried about Lu Xu," Mergen said. "We have no idea what happened to him after he was captured."

"The dark lady and the plague god must have some use for him. He's not necessarily in any immediate danger," Li Jinglong offered in an attempt to reassure him. "What most concerns me is that we don't know how they managed to gain control of him in the first place. There, we're at a loss; we

don’t even know if the black-clothed Lu Xu that Zhao Zilong told us about was really him.”

“It may be like you guessed before,” Mergen said. “The yao interfered during the white deer’s reincarnation, so only part of its soul incarnated into Lu Xu’s body when he was born. The other part might be…”

Li Jinglong finished for him: “…the Lu Xu in black.”

Mergen’s expression was grave, but Li Jinglong let out a dry chuckle. “Good heavens, what a mess… So, which one are you looking for? The fact that he’s a man is one thing, but now there’s two of him.”

“We have to figure out how to save him first,” Mergen said. “The rest I can figure out later. I think I should go check on Hongjun.”

Mergen brushed past Li Jinglong and strode off down the corridor.

Hongjun was sprawled out on the bed, deep in thought.

Zhao Zilong splashed in his basin. “Hongjun, all that stuff you said earlier today about your parents—it made me so sad.”

Hongjun seemed not to hear him. He said quietly, “Zhao Zilong, do you think…Chong Ming hated my mom?”

“Hongjun!” the carp yao cried in shock. “What are you saying?!”

“He must have hated her,” Hongjun muttered. “He must hate me too. If it wasn’t for me and my mom, my dad wouldn’t have left Yaojin Palace. I knew he was angry with my dad, but my dad died and could never return. That’s the only reason he took me in.”

“What are you thinking?!” Zhao Zilong leapt out of the basin and pattered over to Hongjun, tail flapping behind him. “Hongjun, Chong Ming loves you. It’s not fake! What’s gotten into you?”

But Hongjun was still muttering. “If he didn’t hate her, why didn’t my parents ask Yaojin Palace for help? It was because Chong Ming never would have helped them…”

The carp yao stared warily at Hongjun.

After that dream, Hongjun had done quite a bit of thinking. He'd reexamined a number of things he'd never questioned in his carefree youth.

"Was it all a nightmare the black-clothed Lu Xu fabricated?" Hongjun wondered aloud, then shook his head. "No. These dreams started a long time ago."

The first vision had hit him after he'd inhaled oblivion pollen. For some reason, as he stood in the courtyard of the Department of Exorcism, he had witnessed a scene directly preceding his parents' deaths. What he'd seen then lined up near perfectly with what he saw in the nightmare. The only difference had been Li Jinglong.

If all of it was fake, why had he been right about Li Jinglong's childhood home in Fuxing Ward with the pomegranate tree in the yard? Li Jinglong said he'd lost all his memories from that year—the same memories Hongjun himself was missing.

What had happened in the time they'd lost? Hongjun felt as if he had been abandoned by the entire world. Before, when Chong Ming had left him, he still had Li Jinglong. Yet now that he'd remembered everything, he was faced with the knowledge that Li Jinglong was his parents' murderer. What was he meant to do *now*?

"You know," he said, "when my uncle asked me to give up being an exorcist and stay here with him at dinner, I thought maybe this is where I'm meant to be."

The carp yao had no idea that this was what Hongjun was thinking as he stewed in silence all day. He was about to offer a few words of comfort himself when footsteps sounded outside and Mergen pushed the door open carrying a bowl of herbal medicine. Hongjun sat up, seeming to steady himself, then asked, "Are we going to look for Lu Xu? When do we start?"

"Take your medicine," Mergen said. He tried to hand Hongjun the bowl, but Hongjun grabbed his wrist. Mergen arched a brow as he looked at Hongjun.

"What did you see that day in the snow?" Hongjun's breathing came fast and shallow. "Was there some sort of dark energy inside me?"

Mergen studied Hongjun's face. After a moment, he set the bowl down. "Hongjun, what did you see in your dream? If you don't want to tell

the chief, can you at least tell me? Both of your gege just want you to be well.”

Hongjun stared at Mergen without speaking. Mergen extended a hand to Hongjun, palm down. “Take it,” he said.

It was the same gesture a dog might use when it offered its paw to a human to shake. Every time Mergen transformed into that mighty wolf, Hongjun had the urge to shake his paw like this. He couldn’t help but chuckle. He pressed his own palm to Mergen’s, and Mergen closed his fingers around it in a gentle hold.

“Tell me.” Mergen looked into Hongjun’s eyes.

“I dreamed…” Hongjun began softly, “that there was a demon seed inside me.”

“And?”

“It’s the reason my parents are dead.” Hongjun’s voice trembled. “Mergen, what is a demon seed?”

“Shh.” Mergen put a hand on the back of Hongjun’s neck and gently pulled him closer. His quiet voice rumbled in Hongjun’s ear. “It’s not real. It’s just a nightmare. It’s a nightmare Lu Xu planted in your heart after falling under Mara’s control.”

Feeling as if a death sentence had been lifted, Hongjun stared at Mergen in incredulous relief.

“Listen to me, Hongjun. I only have one question for you. The chief doesn’t know about this—I’ve never mentioned it to him. If, hypothetically, you had a demon seed inside you…” Mergen glanced toward the door, as if assuring himself they were alone, before continuing. “You would become the host for Mara’s reincarnation, correct?”

“What is Mara?” Hongjun frowned.

“The heavenly demon Mara reincarnates every thousand years,” Mergen explained. “Demonic energy—that is to say, the malign energy and suffering that circulates through the heavenly and earthly meridians, unable to be purified—gathers in the human realm without dispersing. This energy becomes the demon Mara.”

Hongjun recalled the last page of the book he had read in his dream—it had borne the caption *Mara*. His memories suddenly resolved into clear focus.

"Right," Hongjun said.

"All of us—the gray wolf and the white deer; Yongsi's hereditary position, the Dragon-Quelling Immortal; A-Tai, the sacred prince of Tokharistan; even Di Renjie, as the late wielder of the Sword of Wisdom who monitored the world's demonic energy on behalf of Acalanatha—our shared goal is to defend the human realm and purify the world's demonic energy. Correct?"

Hongjun nodded, his eyes filled with uncertainty.

"That's why I'm sure," Mergen concluded, "that there's no such demon seed in your body. Liu Fei said Mara has appeared ahead of schedule. Think about what that black-clad Lu Xu did."

Hongjun's head abruptly cleared. The same dark energy had appeared all the way back when they had burned that pile of fox yao in Xingqing Palace—the malign energy of their pain and suffering had surged into the heavens along with a dark fog. The black fire spewing from the eight-tailed fox's eyes, the roars of the dragon's sons, the black mist that had dispersed when Mergen had woken Liu Fei…

"That was all demonic energy?" Hongjun frowned.

Mergen nodded, grave. "Mara has already appeared and is hiding in some corner of the world. There's no way you can have a seed of its resurrection inside you. You can't be Mara. Correct?"

Mergen tapped two fingers on Hongjun's chest, over his heart. He did have a point. Hongjun felt much better.

"But then, how do we explain my dream?" Hongjun frowned.

Mergen looked placidly back at Hongjun. "The white deer can walk in dreams. He's seen the dreams of many humans, yao, and other living creatures, including yours. Since Lu Xu has fallen under the sway of our enemies, he has become the source of nightmares."

Hongjun nodded sharply. This seemed to make sense as well. "Is that…so?" he muttered.

The carp yao sighed. “Hongjun, don’t overthink it.”

“Our most important task right now,” Mergen said, “is finding Lu Xu and saving him from the yao.”

“We should leave as soon as we can,” Hongjun said.

Mergen picked up the bowl and handed it to Hongjun again, shaking his head. “No matter how worried I am about Lu Xu, I’m not going anywhere before I’m sure you’re better.”

Moved, Hongjun took the bowl.

“Sleep,” Mergen said. “You’ll recover. Zhao Zilong’s right: Don’t overthink it.”

Hongjun nodded. Mergen laid a hand on his forehead and pressed him gently back down onto the bed, murmuring an incantation under his breath. Hongjun slowly stilled, eyelids growing heavy under the effect of the medicine, and fell asleep.

Mergen brought the bowl out and returned to Li Jinglong’s room.

“How did it go?” Li Jinglong asked.

Mergen’s weary face was tinged with guilt. “He believed me.”

Li Jinglong’s forehead remained knotted with consternation as Mergen went on, “He admitted it himself—he said there was a demon seed inside him in his dream.”

Li Jinglong looked at him in shock. After a moment, he managed, “What will happen to him?”

Mergen shook his head, looking a little lost. “Chief, you have to speak to his adoptive father. He must know about the thing inside him. This is far beyond what you and I can handle.”

Breathing heavily, Li Jinglong steadied himself with a hand against the wall as the world spun around him. “What happened that night probably won’t happen again any time soon, right?”

“It’s hard to say,” Mergen responded. “The corrupted white deer likely activated the seed inside Hongjun to make him completely lose control out there. The yao manipulating him must know about this by now;

we can’t guarantee the white deer won’t activate the demon seed a second time.”

“This makes no sense! If Hongjun has the demon seed of Mara, who was it that corrupted the white deer?” Li Jinglong asked irritably.

“How should I know?!” Mergen was also short-tempered. “We have too little information! Maybe there are two demon seeds? Three? Or maybe the thing inside Hongjun isn’t what we’re thinking at all—”

Li Jinglong stalked outside. “Where are you going?” Mergen called after him. “He just went to sleep!”

“Getting some air,” Li Jinglong said over his shoulder. “I need to cool my head.”

He stood in the courtyard for a while, barefoot in his plain white underclothes, then carefully pushed open Hongjun’s door. Hongjun was sprawled out on the bed, fast asleep.

Li Jinglong sat at the edge of the bed and stared at him blankly. Hongjun looked like a carefree child in his sleep, one leg thrust out of the blankets, the hem of his pants riding up to reveal the fair skin of his ankle.

“Hongjun,” Li Jinglong said, soft.

Hongjun didn’t hear him. Li Jinglong lay down next to him, folded his arms over his stomach, and drifted off to sleep, anxiety etched between his brows.

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Chapter 62:
The Ghost King Awakens

THE SKY was bright again when Hongjun opened his eyes, feeling refreshed. The blankets beside him were warm, as if someone had just risen from them, and Li Jinglong's scent lingered on the pillows. A delicately fragrant branch of plum blossoms lay near his headboard.

"Zhao Zilong." Hongjun sat up, holding the branch. "Did you pick this for me?"

The basin in the corner was empty.

"Where's the fish?" Hongjun pushed himself off the bed and began looking around. As he passed the door, he heard Li Jinglong and Mergen's voices in heated conversation not far away. Hongjun changed into his combat robes and hurried out, worried they were about to get into a fight.

When he arrived at the front hall, he yelped in surprise.

A-Tai was clad in a luxurious marten coat, smiling and waving his sapphire-blue cyclone fan as he spoke to Li Jinglong and Mergen. The carp yao listened, leaping happily up and down several times on the table. Behind A-Tai was a young Göktürk man with tanned skin and a head of unruly hair. He was clad in leather armor with several throwing knives strapped to his waist.

"A-Tai!"

Hongjun thought A-Tai would greet him with a loud *Hai mie hou bi*, but instead, everyone fell silent upon seeing him.

"Hongjun." A-Tai grinned in an uncharacteristic display of earnestness, his eyes dancing with joy at being reunited with his brothers. A long moment passed before he yelled the expected, "Hai mie hou bi!" and rushed forward to engulf Hongjun in a hug.

He hadn't expected A-Tai to come all the way to Yumen Pass. Hongjun was so delighted he didn't know what to say at first. Finally he chirped, "You came! You actually came! I thought there was no way!"

A-Tai chuckled. “How could I stay away when the Department of Exorcism is in trouble? Hongjun, this is my good friend Ashina Adarvan. You should get to know each other—both of you use throwing knives.”

“Jia la si mi.” The Göktürk youth laid a hand over the left side of his chest and bowed to Hongjun in a respectful greeting. Hongjun cupped his hands and returned the bow.

“All we need is Yongsi, and all of us will be here,” Li Jinglong said.

“He’s too far away; it’ll take him ages,” A-Tai said. “I suggest we get a move on without waiting for him. We can leave a letter.”

Just over a month ago, A-Tai, with his formal letter of appointment in hand, had started gathering his old troops by the Wusun Ancient Road. He hadn’t been there even three weeks when he received the letter Li Jinglong had sent via a group of itinerant merchants. He’d started his journey back to Hexi immediately.

Qiu Yongsi had told them to send his letters to a villa by West Lake; from there, the letter would still have to be passed on. After doing some calculations, they concluded Qiu Yongsi couldn’t possibly arrive before the start of spring, even if he flew.

“Even one more exorcist is better than nothing,” Li Jinglong said. “I already feel better now that we have you two as reinforcements.”

A-Tai beckoned them over. “I brought something you should take a look at,” he said. “We ran into it when we passed Yardang.”

He led them out of the hall and to the training grounds, waving his fan as he went.

“Hey, Tokharian pretty boy,” the carp yao said. “Why are you fanning yourself in the middle of winter—aren’t you cold?”

“It’s called style.” A-Tai smiled slyly as he waved his cyclone fan. The blue ring on his hand glowed dimly, and the wind warmed as it gusted around him, sending thick sprays of snow into the air.

“If you’d been with us that night,” Mergen said, “our fight against the dark lady would have been a lot easier.”

Just a few months ago, when the heat of autumn had lingered in Chang’an, the gang had often sat and waited for a cool breeze from A-Tai’s

fan. *Oh right!* Hongjun thought—now that A-Tai was here, he didn't need to fear being smothered by that terrible snowstorm.

"We can discuss the snow yao later," A-Tai said, crossing the training grounds to stand in front of a large cage. Within it crouched a man dressed in rags, with a ferocious expression and unnaturally huge eyes. A-Tai explained, "We captured him in Yardang."

Hongjun could tell at a glance that the man was a yao, though not what kind. The carp yao, on the other hand, immediately exclaimed in fright: "Snake!"

The man was indeed a sand snake yao. He stared intently at his visitors, flicking his tongue from time to time. He looked haggard, though perhaps this was to be expected given that snakes were known to hibernate during winter. An unfortunate coincidence had led him to be captured by A-Tai, and he hadn't eaten or drunk in several days, which no doubt contributed to his misery.

The sand snake's voice was hoarse and deep. "You agreed not to kill me."

"And *you* agreed to give us honest answers," A-Tai drawled with an elegant flick of his fan. "Tell them what you told me."

The sand snake glanced at Hongjun, seemingly afraid. "The ghost king is in their hands. They found the white deer's incarnation, and the yao king had the plague god use the white deer's spiritual power to gather the corpse-ghost army. The legion stands at the ready, prepared to march at any time to assist Mara in killing the human emperor when the heavenly demon descends to the mortal world. That's what I heard."

"Wait!" Hongjun's voice cracked with shock. "Say that again!"

The sand snake raised his head, meeting Hongjun's eyes. Out of everyone here, Hongjun was the only one with whom he felt a sense of kinship, despite the young man's intimidating aura. Privately, the sand snake suspected this boy was related to some powerful yao, but he astutely did not ask.

The snake yao explained that he had once lived near the General's Tomb in Yardang. He'd successfully attained human form twenty years ago, and had been recruited to work for the yao king as a messenger when the

dark lady and the plague god arrived in the wastes. He delivered messages for them from time to time and ran errands, such as buying jianbing guozi from the Gua Prefecture night markets on the dark lady's behalf. The plague god hailed from the Central Plains and had been sent to Yardang by the yao king; the dark lady, on the other hand, was native to these lands.

"Wow," Hongjun marveled. "I didn't know yao had a household registration system too."

"The dark lady wasn't like this before," the snake yao said. "Everyone says she changed after she started working for the yao king."

"Everyone?" Mergen furrowed his brow. "How many yao are working for the yao king?"

"There are all sorts of yao, in many forms—those that fly and those that swim, and all those in between," the sand snake said. "It's no small number, and those are just the ones I know. A lot of them were sent elsewhere."

Li Jinglong was struck by a feeling of foreboding. "Where did they go?"

"No idea. The yao king sent them to do Mara's bidding, I suppose."

"How does he communicate with them?" Li Jinglong asked.

"Through a mural in the Mogao Caves," replied the sand snake.

Everyone was shocked. When A-Tai had captured the yao, he had only asked him a few cursory questions. He hadn't expected Li Jinglong to coax such shocking information out of him in such a short conversation. A-Tai clapped a hand to his forehead, then patted Li Jinglong on the shoulder. As expected, A-Tai simply wasn't suited for interrogation—he'd leave the rest to Li Jinglong.

Li Jinglong pressed ahead with more detailed questions, which the sand snake, for the most part, answered obligingly. According to their prisoner, the yao king manifested as the silhouette of a dragon in the mural, and he and his minions had started plotting this nefarious scheme over two decades ago.

The plague god had come to Dunhuang first, where he found the dark lady living in seclusion at the northern foot of the Qilian Mountains.

Eighteen years ago, the two yao had worked together to catch a rare spiritual beast. According to legend, this beast resided within a mural in the Mogao Caves and was reincarnated as a human every few hundred years. The two powerful yao intercepted the beast when it left the Mogao Caves to be born into its next life and successfully polluted it with demonic energy. They had worked painstakingly to refine the beast into their own tool ever since.

"The white deer," Mergen murmured, trading a look with Li Jinglong.

"The beautiful lady you're looking for?" A-Tai asked, surprised.

"He's a guy now," the carp yao interjected.

"Stop bringing that up." Mergen put his head in his hands. "We don't even know if Lu Xu is dead or alive. I don't give a damn whether he's a man or a woman right now!"

"I don't know if it was a deer," the sand snake continued, "but it was no easy task. I remember the plague god had me call for reinforcements."

The plague god seemed to have encountered some powerful opponent while hunting the spiritual beast, the snake yao explained. But upon capture, the beast was ever so slightly off—his physical body had disintegrated, and only his soul remained.

"When the white deer is without a physical body or somewhere else to reside," Mergen cut in, "it should return to the heavenly meridians."

"Once the plague god and the dark lady had control of the beast, they corroded his soul with demonic energy, then used his spiritual power to command the corpse ghosts."

The transformation of the white deer into the demonic black deer had been a time-consuming process, taking them close to ten years. They spent another eight attempting to gain control of the ghost king and his general. In the end, the only corpse ghosts they managed to awaken were Liu Fei and his men, who immediately fell under the plague god and the dark lady's sway.

The ghost king still slumbered, but the yao king could wait no longer. He ordered the pair to capture Hexi as soon as possible and to eliminate the

troublesome Geshu Han.

The dark lady had thus ordered Liu Fei to lead the army of corpse ghosts out alone. She had never expected the gray wolf to encounter him by chance and rouse him from his dreams. Furious, she had summoned a clump of black mist from within the mural, determined to recapture Liu Fei. Yet on her way to find the corpse ghost, she had happened across the other half of the white deer's soul, which had incarnated into human form eighteen years ago.

"Then…where's Lu Xu?" Mergen's voice shook.

"I-I don't know," the sand snake replied. "But the dark lady was injured when she returned. You did that, didn't you?"

The sand snake surveyed his captors. When no one answered, he continued, "They went back to Yardang, and they had the white deer rouse the ghost king. They've gathered a hundred thousand corpse ghosts and are preparing to march on Yumen Pass—"

"What?!" everyone cried in alarm.

Realizing now how serious things were, Li Jinglong glanced at A-Tai, who shrugged. "I came the moment I heard."

The news that the true ghost king—a corpse ghost even stronger than Liu Fei—had risen from his coffin to lead his army stunned Hongjun. The image of a sea of corpse ghosts massacring everyone in the city rose in his mind unbidden—and his own uncle would be the general guarding Yumen Pass. His heart pounded with fear, as if he'd already witnessed the devastation. Voice wavering, he asked, "What should we do?"

Li Jinglong seemed to come to a swift decision. "When do they plan to march?"

"The day after tomorrow? Yesterday? The day before that?" The sand snake counted off the days on his fingers—it was winter, and he was unused to tracking time in the cold season. "They wanted me to report to the yao king right away, because they spotted—"

"Enough," A-Tai interjected. "Let's stop here."

Startled, Li Jinglong shot a look at A-Tai, who merely said, "They're launching a surprise attack on us; we've no time to waste."

Li Jinglong nodded. He rushed toward the main hall, barking to the rest of the group, “Strategy meeting! Now!” Calling to the guards, he added, “Inform General Jia and his deputies that we have an emergency military situation to deal with. Go!”

The young Göktürk man, Ashina Adarvan, patted Hongjun on the shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

The moment Li Jinglong sprang into action, Hongjun experienced a relief he hadn’t felt in ages—his worries melted away in an instant. This time, Li Jinglong didn’t have to tell Hongjun to trust him; he replaced reassuring words with concrete action.

Hongjun nodded and turned to the caged sand snake yao once more.

“Release me,” the yao said. “You promised!”

Ashina Adarvan unsheathed a throwing knife and scrutinized the sand snake.

“Don’t kill him,” Hongjun blurted.

Casting him a glance, Ashina Adarvan sheathed his knife. But Hongjun didn’t call the shots here; when the sand snake turned beseeching eyes on him, he said, “I’ll ask the chief.”

“My king,” the sand snake yao pleaded. “Every word I said was true, I swear!”

“I’m not your king,” Hongjun replied before rushing inside in search of Li Jinglong.

The estate was bustling with military personnel. Li Jinglong conveyed the information they’d gotten from their captive as he donned his armor before a spread map, pointing out routes the army might take. He advised Jia Zhou to station more guards at the gates as a measure against surprise attacks.

“Impossible!” Jia Zhou said. “We haven’t spotted any smoke from the beacon towers. How could there be an attack?”

“The enemy has a yaoguai who can call up wind and snow,” Li Jinglong explained. “Even if your men spot them, they won’t be able to light any fires.”

Jia Zhou fell silent.

Li Jinglong sat and pulled on the boots a soldier handed him as he gave orders. “Give me two thousand men armed with grappling hooks and heavy crossbows. Have them lie in wait by the main roads in the Qilian Valley…” Li Jinglong freed a hand to point at several areas on the map. “Here, here, and here. They’ll have to pass by one of those spots.”

Jia Zhou agreed at once, barking, “As Chief Li says! Give him five thousand of our best!”

A red line was drawn on the map starting at Yardang, then passing southwest through the northwest range of the Qilian Mountains and Yumen Pass to finally enter Yumen District proper—the most likely route of the enemy troops.

“They’re coming from Yardang,” A-Tai mused, deep in thought. “If we’re quick—and everything goes according to plan—we may indeed be able to intercept them. But how are you planning to deal with an army of two hundred thousand corpse-ghost cavalrymen?”

“We’ll discuss battle plans as we ride,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun pointed outside. “The snake yao—”

“We’ll release him later.” Li Jinglong secured his armor. Striding briskly out of the main hall, he called, “Department of Exorcism, heed my command!”

A-Tai, Mergen, and Hongjun immediately said in unison, “Yes, sir!”

Li Jinglong glanced at Hongjun. “Maybe you should stay with your uncle.”

“I’m going with you, Chief.” Hongjun checked his throwing knives before turning to Jia Zhou. “Don’t worry, Jiujiu.”[2]

Mergen and Li Jinglong exchanged a look, and Li Jinglong gave a slight nod.

“Go, then,” Jia Zhou said. “Come back safe and sound.”

The group of five mounted their horses and rode out of the city. Yet almost as soon as they were through the city gates and onto the open plains, Li Jinglong reined his horse to a stop, seemingly deep in thought.

“What is it?” Hongjun asked.

“You think he’s a spy?” A-Tai seemed to have expected Li Jinglong to pause here. He brought his horse around, and a second meeting commenced, just like that.

Hongjun was speechless. But by now he was used to this; after a moment of thought, he put it together himself—Li Jinglong had put on a show of mobilizing Yumen Pass for the sand snake yao’s sake. *You guys are way too cunning!*

“I doubt it,” Li Jinglong answered.

“I agree,” Mergen added. “He seemed terrified during the chief’s interrogation.”

“Mm,” A-Tai hummed thoughtfully. “I didn’t expect him to be so afraid.”

“What’s he afraid of?” Hongjun asked. “He seemed normal to me.”

“You,” Ashina Adarvan said.

Hongjun’s brow creased in confusion. A-Tai silenced Ashina Adarvan with a glance and chuckled. “You can call him Adarvan, Hongjun. He’s a bit like you—honest to a fault.”

“As the Han people might say, I wear my heart on my sleeve,” Ashina Adarvan drawled.

“Why’s he scared of *me*?” Hongjun asked.

“Okay, enough chatter,” Li Jinglong said, bringing the conversation to an end. “We’ll stick together and scout the place out.”

Everyone expressed their agreement, and their party set out once more.

The carp yao piped up from behind Hongjun, “That snake was scared of you the same way I’m scared of cats.”

Only then did Hongjun recall that his dad was a peacock and his adoptive father was a phoenix; snakes were probably instinctively afraid of powerful bird yao. Satisfied, he asked no more questions.

Hongjun heard a whistle and looked up to see A-Tai grinning at him. “Hongjun!” he called. “Toss Zhao Zilong over!”

“What are you gonna do to me, Tokharian pretty boy?!”

“It’s been so long,” A-Tai answered. “I’ve missed your hairy legs, Boss. Come over and let me fondle them.”

Everyone burst into laughter. Hongjun figured A-Tai wanted to tease Zhao Zilong, so he tossed the carp over. A-Tai grabbed the fish and urged his horse ahead of the rest.

The wind grew stronger as they left Yumen District behind and galloped across the plains. Hongjun found the warhorse under him slow, far inferior to his previous mount. He’d killed the horses the emperor had gifted them during his nightmare—as the thought surfaced in his mind, guilt pressed to the fore once again.

Li Jinglong cantered over to ride beside him. “Feeling better now?” When Hongjun nodded, Li Jinglong asked, “Do you want to ride double with me?”

Hongjun waved a hand—riding this way was fine. Mergen’s words the night before had resolved many of his fears. Though he still harbored doubts about the demon seed—and still felt weird seeing Li Jinglong—much of the unease he’d felt when facing the chief had dissipated.

The rest of the group quickened their pace, leaving Hongjun and Li Jinglong to ride alone at the end of the procession as if they’d unanimously agreed to give the pair a chance to talk.

“Do you want to stay in Yumen?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun tilted his head, observing Li Jinglong. “No.”

“Why not?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I’m afraid I’d miss you guys.” The moment Hongjun had seen A-Tai this morning, he’d discarded his half-formed plan to stay. He’d thought the goodbyes they’d exchanged before would be forever, but now he saw that those who left would eventually return, bringing new friends with them.

“But your jiujiu is here.”

Hongjun slowed his horse as they crossed a stream. He thought for a while, picking up his pace again. “The northwest is too cold. I’d never get used to it.”

Li Jinglong laughed. “You should tell your uncle yourself, then. Don’t look at me—I don’t need any new enemies.”

Hongjun thought of Chong Ming and laughed as well.

“Come on.” Li Jinglong reached a hand toward Hongjun. “Ride with me.”

An image flashed through Hongjun’s mind—nine-year-old Li Jinglong extending a hand to him in the alley before leading him into the Department of Exorcism headquarters. He’d held Hongjun’s hand so tightly, as if afraid he’d lose him, yet he’d led him straight into that fatal spiritual array. He was the reason Hongjun had lost everything he once had.

Hongjun dug in his heels, and his horse shot into the distance.

“Wait!” Li Jinglong called. He flicked the reins, streaking after him.

Ahead of them, A-Tai, Mergen, and Ashina Adarvan were galloping along at the foot of the northwest range of the Qilian Mountains. Ashina Adarvan looked back from time to time, only to see Hongjun and Li Jinglong riding over the plains one after the other, two tiny black dots upon the boundless earth beneath the vast sky.

“Quit looking,” A-Tai said with a grin. “He’s taken.”

“So the first one to see something gets to keep it,” Ashina Adarvan replied casually. “Do all you Central Plains folk follow this rule?”

Mergen paused, but once he got it, he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“You shouldn’t laugh, Mergen,” A-Tai said. “I haven’t laughed at you over the man you’re destined to wed, you know.”

Mergen’s grin dissolved as he flushed violently, his brows knotting in a tight furrow.

“It seems everyone in your Department of Exorcism has their own troubles, huh?” Ashina Adarvan said.

“Tell me about it,” A-Tai replied. “We’re heading over to save the love of Mergen’s life right now, are we not?”

“He’s not the love of my life,” Mergen snapped. “Quit running your mouth.”

“Is this demon seed you were talking about really inside that boy with the throwing knives?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

“Don’t tease him,” A-Tai said, turning serious. “I don’t care how you have your fun usually, Adarvan, but don’t you lay a finger on Hongjun.”

Ashina Adarvan grinned lazily. “If he was willing to have me, I wouldn’t need to have fun with anyone else.”

“Do you have the heart lamp, like the chief?” Mergen asked. “You can’t restrain the demonic energy in him.”

“Mergen, this is crucial,” A-Tai said. “Are you sure Hongjun is the one the snake yao was talking about before I interrupted him?”

The carp yao, still in A-Tai’s arms, peeked his head out, scrutinizing Ashina Adarvan as he eavesdropped on their conversation.

“We fought a difficult battle before you arrived,” Mergen said. “Hongjun said he saw his parents’ deaths in a nightmare—that’s what woke the demon seed.”

The carp yao chimed in: “Can the heart lamp really dispel demonic energy? Ah, why does my Hongjun have such a pitiful fate?”

“Let’s leave it to the chief,” Mergen said, a bit helpless. “What happens now will depend on his luck.”

“His luck?” the carp yao said. “Are you sure? Then we’re doomed!”

No one knew what to say. Confused, Ashina Adarvan asked, “What do you mean?”

“It’s possible the demon seed in Hongjun can only be exorcized by the heart lamp in Li Jinglong’s body,” A-Tai explained, impatient at his repeated questioning. “That’s what we’re discussing. After this battle, the chief’ll head to Yaojin Palace in the Taihang Mountains to see if anything can be done.”

Ashina Adarvan thought for a while, then sang a line from a Turkic folk song: “*Amidst the dark plains, one thing alone can call up the dawn; the lamp lit for me by the girl I love—!*”

He spurred his horse ahead. Ashina Adarvan’s meaning was clear—love always had the power to dispel darkness.

A-Tai didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He shook his head. “What does he know?”

Snow had begun to fall again as everyone gathered at the mouth of a narrow canyon at the foot of the Qilian Mountains. Mergen tossed a set of leather armor to Hongjun, which he donned readily before stretching his arms. A-Tai whipped his fan, and a fierce gust of wind rose, whisking their group of five up to a cliff near the top of the mountain. The local garrison had erected a small wooden hut here for the purpose of keeping watch on the floor of the canyon below. Looking into the distance from here, one could see the western end of the Great Wall bathed in the sunset glow.

Beginning at Liaodong, the Great Wall snaked through the nation, passing through close to a hundred districts—Bohai, Lukou, Hebei, Jinyang, Guanzhong, and more. The mighty wall served as a connection between the Qin and Han dynasties; between the eternal achievements of the emperors and kings who rose to power, one after the other, in ancient times; between the songs sung by the Five Barbarian Kingdoms beyond Great Tang; between time and the vast territories of the Divine Land. Here, the wall stretched across the boundless expanse of the unforgiving winter, coming to an end at last in a place of nothingness.

The wind blew, bringing with it the fetid stench of corpses. It was so pungent Hongjun couldn’t avoid catching a whiff.

“Where are Jia Zhou’s troops?” A-Tai asked.

The light of the setting sun illuminated the Great Wall and the mountains around it. Li Jinglong, armored and wielding his Sword of Wisdom, pointed into the distance, gesturing for everyone to look.

Abandoned beacon towers stood atop the mountains on either side of the canyon. The troops Jia Zhou deployed had beaten them here; they lay in wait among the peaks, their grappling hooks at the ready. At Li Jinglong’s signal, they tossed out a dozen lengths of sturdy rope from the other side of the canyon, which arced toward the cliff the exorcists were standing on.

Mergen shifted into the gray wolf and caught a length of rope in his teeth, securing it around a boulder. “The corpse-ghost army is approaching,” he said in a low growl. “Where’s Liu Fei?”

Liu Fei had departed alone, bidding them goodbye after Hongjun's descent into demonhood. Li Jinglong hadn't had time to trace him, but he imagined Liu Fei was likely lying in ambush somewhere nearby, or else tailing the corpse-ghost army, waiting for a chance to strike.

"Hongjun, we'll be depending on you when the enemy arrives," Li Jinglong said. "When the corpse army passes beneath us, bring the mountaintops on either side down with your saber."

Hongjun, standing at the edge of the cliff, spread his hands, nodding as his four throwing knives flew into his palms and merged to form his long saber.

Ashina Adarvan looked at Hongjun in shock.

"You can use your spiritual power now?" the gray wolf asked, concerned.

"I'm completely recovered," Hongjun assured him. "You guys don't need to worry."

Li Jinglong scanned the terrain. "There are a few good spots on the opposite cliff where we can push off. I'll have to trouble you all for what comes afterward."

Everyone nodded, looking into the distance as the bloodred sun sank below the horizon. From the edge of the sky rose a dark wave—what seemed to be an endless host of cavalrymen galloping toward the end of the Great Wall.

It was the corpse-ghost army, comprised of an astonishing two hundred thousand soldiers. They swarmed across the barren Gobi toward the Great Wall and plowed straight into it with earth-shattering momentum.

A-Tai's eyes widened. Ashina Adarvan laughed. "They're not planning on keeping a low profile at all."

"That's an army of two hundred thousand," Mergen said. "Any district or city would be crushed to death under their iron hooves."

"Hongjun," Li Jinglong called.

Hongjun turned to look at him. The sunset cast its ruddy light over them, illuminating Li Jinglong's handsome profile. He gazed at Hongjun, then parted his lips to speak.

“They’re here!” Mergen cried.

Hongjun whirled toward the enemy. The ghost army had toppled a sizable length of the Great Wall. They swarmed through the opening, the vanguard already charging into the canyon. The sky overhead, still purple with twilight, turned black as a frigid gust of wind shrieked toward them, bringing with it a snowstorm so heavy it painted the ground white.

“Not yet!” Li Jinglong gripped Hongjun’s hand. The ground shuddered beneath their feet as more and more corpse ghosts streamed into the canyon. Both the soldiers and exorcists on the cliffs watched the scene unfolding with bated breath.

The gray wolf growled, low and guttural, his pupils dilating. In what little light remained, he spotted two warhorses among the main troops that had leapt through the hole in the Great Wall. Sitting astride the first was a massive warrior, his features obscured by an iron faceplate. Upon the second was a lean young man wearing the black robes typical of a military scout—Lu Xu.

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Chapter 63:
A Grim Death for a Great Deed

THE EARTH-SHAKING hoofbeats of the cavalry drowned out every other sound. The mountains trembled with the army's passage, and clumps of snow slid from the peaks as the mighty army of two hundred thousand marched into the canyon between the Qilian Mountains.

The canyon was just over a quarter mile in length. Li Jinglong held his breath as the enemy's vanguard surged forward. The moment he saw Lu Xu and the warrior charge together into the valley, he cried, "Jump!"

At his command, everyone pushed off from the cliff, arms spread wide as they leapt down. Hongjun brandished his saber, spinning it in the air as he gathered his spiritual power and infused it into the blade. He twisted his body and slashed down.

The saber glare flew from the blade, a transparent ripple of force that hurtled forward until it crashed against a snowy peak. Li Jinglong grabbed Hongjun's free wrist, flinging him outward as they continued to plummet. Hongjun used the momentum to slash his saber a second time, shouting at the top of his lungs. Another saber glare careened toward a snowy mountain on the opposite side of the canyon.

"Push off the cliffs!" Li Jinglong called again.

The group slammed into the snowy mountains on the opposite side of the canyon one after another just as the peaks began to collapse, sending a colossal wave of ice and snow tumbling downward. They launched back into the air, away from the crumbling peaks and onto the lengths of rope traversing the narrow canyon.

The ghost army noticed movement above their heads. Lu Xu looked up, only to see an avalanche coming straight at them.

The dark lady, clad in black, shot through the air toward the exorcists with breathtaking speed, shouting over her shoulder, "Get to the end of the canyon!"

She brandished the flowing sleeves of her robes, and a violent blizzard was born from the earth, sending snow flying as she attempted to halt the avalanche in its tracks. Li Jinglong drew his bow, pointing it at the ghost king below. “A-Tai!”

“On it!” A-Tai shook open his cyclone fan. Infusing the device with true fire, he swept it toward the blizzard the dark lady had called up.

Raging flames and seething winds crashed over the canyon. The dark lady’s blizzard dispersed before the fiery winds, and the avalanche plummeted into the canyon at breakneck speed once again. A massive wedge of ice hurtled toward the corpse-ghost soldiers as snow roared down from the mountains on both sides, burying the main column under a thick layer of white. The avalanche was still gathering speed as it spread to the mouth of the canyon. As the ghost king and Lu Xu fled before it with their remaining troops, Li Jinglong, perched on a length of rope, drew his bow.

An arrow infused with energy from the heart lamp leapt from the string. In the dark night, it shone as bright as a shooting star, illuminating every crag of the narrow canyon. The arrow winged through the snow and ice still tumbling to the valley floor, streaking toward the corpse ghosts’ leader.

This was the signal—the moment the light flared, Jia Zhou’s troops released a thousand grappling hooks, all flying straight for the ghost king. The gray wolf dashed forward with a snarl, leaping from boulder to boulder as he made his way toward the mouth of the canyon.

The grappling hooks ensnared the ghost king’s mount like a sprawling net, dragging horse and rider to the ground as the brilliant arrow speared toward the ghost king’s chest.

The ghost king pushed his palms out, and a massive black shield materialized in his hands, blocking the arrow with a dull clang. As shield and arrow collided, the shockwave sent Lu Xu and his mount careening through the air.

The ghost king dispersed the shield and roared, his voice shaking the heavens and earth—the earsplitting sound nearly brought down a second avalanche. He pushed his palms out again, and a long-handled dagger-axe materialized in his hands in the shield’s place. The ghost king swung the weapon in a wide arc, stirring up a powerful gust that flung away the

cascade of snow and ice. He took a half step back as his troops assembled by his side. This time when he extended both palms forward, thousands of wisps of black energy shot from them, surging outward to envelop the falling ice and snow, holding it in place.

Black tendrils of energy rose from the undead soldiers, streaming from every inch of their skin as they gathered in a formation resembling a spiritual array. The ghost king unleashed a guttural yell and thrust his palms forward once more, shoving layer upon layer of snow aside until it piled up into a towering mass. Boulders and ice mixed with snow as he cleared the canyon floor, creating a vast, empty plain.

“Should I do it again?” Hongjun panted, holding his saber.

“Listen for my arrow—when you hear me release it, break through his spiritual technique!” Li Jinglong ordered, drawing his bow once more, a new arrow gleaming brightly on the string.

Just as he was about to let fly, the sharp notes of a whistle cut through the air.

Liu Fei leapt down from one snowy peak, his cape billowing behind him, wielding his wind blade. He spread his arms wide as he fell toward the plains. As the howling winds threaded through the holes in his blade, it sent up a wail like the awakening of a monstrous beast.

The soldiers surrounding the ghost king drew back as Liu Fei swung for the ghost king’s head. The ghost king pivoted, parrying Liu Fei’s wind blade with his dagger-axe. The metallic rasp of their weapons colliding reverberated through the canyon.

Liu Fei’s golden blade thrummed in his hands. As he slashed, he growled in rage, “Your Majesty!”

The ghost king leapt into the air and fled, deserting the canyon.

“After him!” Li Jinglong yelled. He slung his bow over his shoulder before joining the others sprinting down the mountain paths. Swords in hand, Jia Zhou’s soldiers charged down both sides of the canyon with a chorus of battle cries.

Chaos reigned on the plains below—the undead soldiers surged in every direction, accompanied by the whistle of Liu Fei’s wind blade

slashing through the air. When Hongjun reached the plain, he dashed toward the source of the wind blade's cries.

A-Tai's voice rang in his ears: "Watch out!"

A tornado of flame erupted before their eyes, emitting a billowing heatwave that seared across the battlefield and set the undead soldiers alight. The corpse ghosts were bathed in the conflagration as they swung their blades, their flaming bodies illuminating the night.

"Lu Xu is just ahead!" the gray wolf howled. "I'm going to grab him!"

"Let's split up!" Li Jinglong shouted back. "Divide and conquer!"

Hongjun leapt onto the gray wolf's back, and he and Mergen sped off at a blistering pace, skirting around the heart of the battle raging between the Great Tang troops and the undead soldiers.

Horrified, Li Jinglong cried, "Hongjun, get back here!"

But the gray wolf was too fast; Li Jinglong couldn't hope to catch up. With the piercing call of the wind blade ringing in his ears, he had no choice but to turn back and make his way toward the center of the Great Tang army's battle formation.

The battlefield was thick with corpse ghosts wreathed in flame. Another snowstorm rolled in, bringing with it the dark lady's wrath. "Who are you?!" she snarled.

"Oh my!" A-Tai grinned, fan in hand. "What an awful temper for such a pretty lady—that won't do." He flicked his fan again, summoning another wave of flames that collided with the blizzard.

It was an extraordinary spectacle: A bright line of flames roared up from the ground to clash with the great swirls of snow blowing down from the sky like a galaxy of stars. Masses of troops battled under the curtain of night, lit by the orange glow of fire and the white glare of snow in a scene straight from the most fantastical story.

The dark lady took a deep breath, barely containing her rage. As she turned to fly toward the battlefield, A-Tai propelled himself into the air on the back of a gale. He said with a chuckle, "Why don't you focus on me?!"

The snow yao drew her flowing sleeves back, giving A-Tai a shock as she revealed her pitch-black face. They shot spiritual techniques at each other in midair, projectiles of fire and ice smashing into one another like thousands of glittering stars.

Li Jinglong, armed with his Sword of Wisdom, hurried toward the insistent hum of the wind blade. Liu Fei and the ghost king were locked in battle, their blurred silhouettes darting in all directions, heedless of any obstacle in their path.

Liu Fei slammed the ghost king into the ground and punched him in the jaw. “Wake up!”

The ghost king roared in anger and aimed a kick at Liu Fei, sending him crashing into a boulder before surging forward to ram him into the snow.

Li Jinglong lunged, thrusting his blade at the ghost king’s back. Sensing the danger, the ghost king swept a leg out in a roundhouse kick that toppled Li Jinglong into the snow. The ghost king raised his hand, summoning his dagger-axe. Just as he pulled back to thrust it into Li Jinglong’s chest, a pair of knives flew toward his face.

The ghost king snapped his head back, his helmet coming loose and dropping to the ground. His black hair blew in the wind as he turned to look for his new assailant.

“Hongjun!” Li Jinglong yelled.

“Afraid not!” Ashina Adarvan shook two more knives from his sleeves. He cracked his neck as he stood calmly in the snow, observing the ghost king’s every move.

“Don’t fight him head on!” Li Jinglong crouched, ready to spring forward again, but Ashina Adarvan was already moving, swift as the wind as he slashed toward the ghost king’s throat.

Li Jinglong’s warning had come too late: The moment Ashina Adarvan rushed forward, the ghost king raised his right arm to parry the strike. Their legs slammed against each other as they both kicked out, and the ghost king’s left fist rained blows on Ashina Adarvan’s chest and abdomen with such force he felt as if a mountain crashed into him. He spat a glob of blood as he flew backward into the snow.

“What…kind of monster is this…?” Ashina Adarvan gasped as he staggered to his feet. “I quit! I’m leaving!”

True to his word, he turned on his heel and ran off to help Mergen. Both Li Jinglong and Liu Fei were left speechless.

Rather than chase after Ashina Adarvan, the ghost king swung his gaze back to Li Jinglong. As undead soldiers swarmed around them, Li Jinglong thought, *Shit.*

Liu Fei struggled to his feet, facing off against the ghost king beside Li Jinglong. He flipped his wind blade in his grip, infusing it with spiritual power. As the blade buzzed with energy, the undead soldiers surrounding them slowed, giving Liu Fei and Li Jinglong a wide berth, as if afraid.

The ghost king turned to Liu Fei with murky eyes. Li Jinglong imbued the Sword of Wisdom with blinding light, holding his breath as he watched the ghost king. Li Jinglong had to defeat him in a single strike. One punch from the ghost king, and he’d likely never get up again.

As the undead soldiers drew back, Liu Fei watched the ghost king intently. The ghost king, silent, slowly raised a hand. Red light flashed, and a rattle drum appeared in his fingers. He rotated it between his palms, and the drum sounded twice.

Thwack, thwack—the undead soldiers stopped in their tracks and surged back toward their king.

“Your Majesty!” Liu Fei growled.

The undead soldiers leveled their crossbows at Liu Fei and Li Jinglong. The ghost king spun the rattle drum again, and Liu Fei’s wind blade flew from his grip and soared toward the ghost king, who snatched it from the air before turning to face Li Jinglong.

Realizing there was no escape, Li Jinglong gritted his teeth and stepped forward to meet his opponent.

Across the battlefield, Hongjun turned to look into the distance. “What’s going on over there?”

The undead soldiers had abandoned their battles, rushing toward the center of the fray. Even the ones buried by the avalanche had managed to

claw their way out and lurch toward the dark cluster of bodies across the field.

The gray wolf glanced back as it sped across the snowy plain. “There’s no time! We have to find Lu Xu or we can’t awaken the ghost king!”

At that moment, Lu Xu—dressed in black—had recovered his mount and was watching the battle from higher ground. He started in surprise when he saw the gray wolf hurtling toward him with Hongjun on his back.

Lu Xu leapt down from his horse and dashed down the slope, and the gray wolf twisted in midair to chase after him. Lu Xu was as fast as lightning, but the wolf remained doggedly on his heels.

“You can’t catch him if you’re carrying me!” Hongjun yelled over the wind.

“I’ll try my best!” the gray wolf bit out.

Hongjun leapt from the gray wolf’s back, landing with a roll, and dashed toward a nearby boulder. “Lead him here!”

The gray wolf shrank in size and resumed his frantic chase. Without Hongjun on his back, he was finally faster than Lu Xu. Even with Lu Xu running like mad, the distance between them gradually closed. Just as the gray wolf pounced, dark mist exploded from Lu Xu, and he transformed into a deer as black as ink, leaping into the sky.

Claws meeting empty air, the gray wolf landed in a crouch, then used his momentum to propel himself upward. Energy coursed through the black deer’s body as he tossed his antlers at the gray wolf, flinging the wolf into the air. The wolf hooked his claws into the deer’s antlers, and the two crashed to the ground. The deer struggled to break free, but the wolf refused to loosen his grip.

As wolf and deer thrashed in the snow, Hongjun twirled his knife in his hands, ready to throw, but the curtain of powdered snow made it impossible to aim. The wolf held the deer down, its deep growls shaking the earth. Dark mist swirled from the black deer, as if something was being driven from his body.

The deer turned his head to the side and spoke in Lu Xu's voice. "Gray…wolf…" he said grimly. "Give up. The white deer is long dead."

Blue flames erupted over the gray wolf's fur. Rays of white light shot from his eyes as he snarled, "Who are you? You dare steal the white deer's body?!"

"The most painful thing in life isn't to lose someone, or to become someone else," the black deer murmured, undeterred. "It is to be forced to watch, every day and every night, the endless pain and suffering of all who scrape out their existence in this mortal world."

Black mist burst from the deer's magnificent antlers, splitting into thousands of fine threads that fanned out across the snow. They tangled together in a dark web, enveloping the gray wolf completely.

In the middle of the ghost army, Li Jinglong and Liu Fei were fighting for their lives. The ghost king fought them both at once, easily holding them at bay as his long-handled dagger-axe whipped through the air.

Li Jinglong was no match for him in power, but he still held the Sword of Wisdom, and the heart lamp remained lodged in his chest—for this reason alone, the ghost king seemed wary of him. Liu Fei took the brunt of his attacks; his armor was already in pieces when the ghost king struck yet again, his successive blows landing with the fury of a thunderstorm until he succeeded in snapping the bones of Liu Fei's arm.

"Liu Fei!" Li Jinglong screamed.

The ghost king turned toward Li Jinglong, dagger-axe in hand. Liu Fei rose unsteadily to his feet despite his shattered body, his hair a chaotic tangle. A bitter smile tugged at his lips as he locked eyes with Li Jinglong.

Li Jinglong's heart pounded in his chest; he could see it in the general's gaze—Liu Fei intended to embark on his true death.

Liu Fei lunged forward, shouting, "Do it!"

Li Jinglong bolted toward the ghost king, sword in hand. The ghost king dove toward him, aiming to kill Li Jinglong on the spot. As Li Jinglong's sword slashed toward its mark, Liu Fei clasped his palms

together and leapt onto the ghost king's back, locking him in a stranglehold with a savage cry. Seizing his chance, Li Jinglong plunged his sword through the ghost king's chest.

"Make sure not to…damage his core…" Liu Fei tightened his arms around the ghost king's neck.

The energy of the heart lamp flowed down Li Jinglong's arms and into the Sword of Wisdom. The ghost king snarled in rage, gripping the sword with both hands even as the relentless rays of white light burned his flesh. Li Jinglong felt the heart lamp's energy stream into the ghost king's body, warring against the black mist inside him.

In the next moment, the ghost king flung Li Jinglong aside with a feral growl, his palm slamming against Li Jinglong's shoulder and shattering bone. Li Jinglong collapsed onto the snowy plain. No longer suffering from the searing glare of the heart lamp, the ghost king grabbed Liu Fei and hurled him through the air.

The ghost king's dagger-axe materialized in his hands as he fell upon his crumpled target. Liu Fei was still struggling to stand when the ghost king impaled him through the chest.

The blade pierced cleanly through and pinned him to the snow with a crisp clinking sound—the ghost king had stabbed mercilessly into Liu Fei's core. The core cracked and shattered, and at last exploded, leaving behind nothing but a cloud of green mist. Liu Fei's eyes went wide. The green mist rose out of his chest, curling up along the dagger-axe's shaft.

"Liu Fei!" Li Jinglong cried frantically as he fought to get back on his feet.

"Finally…I'm…" Liu Fei murmured. "I'm free. From now on, Your Majesty…you're the only one who remains lonely…"

Liu Fei's eyes stayed open as his skin and flesh rotted away before their eyes, revealing the white bone beneath. The green mist enveloped the ghost king like a lingering spirit, restricting his movement.

Li Jinglong charged forward again. Howling in grief, he plunged his sword into the ghost king's unprotected back.

The ghost king’s dagger-axe clattered to the ground as blinding rays of light erupted from the sword. His legs buckled, and he fell to his knees in the snow. Li Jinglong let the heart lamp’s light flood the ghost king’s body as the corpse threw his head back and screamed in pain. Black smoke, dispersed by the light, streamed out of every orifice.

A-Tai was chasing the dark lady through the air, soaring toward the snowy peaks surrounding the battlefield. Hearing the ghost king’s agonized roars echoing far below, A-Tai said with a chuckle, “This game’s almost over, isn’t it, lovely? It’s time you gave up.”

The snow yao yanked at her robes. “This is far from over!” she hissed as her clothing fell away.

Her naked body was as white as her face was black. A-Tai watched in alarm as ice swirled between them. He called up a gust of wind to send himself high into the air, afraid she was planning to sacrifice herself to take him down. In the next sweep of his cyclone fan, ice, flames, lightning, and sand rained down on the dark lady in a wild torrent.

The dark lady had turned herself into crystalline ice. She screamed, and the mountains and plains for miles around—all the lands connected to her—were instantly blanketed in a vast expanse of frost. With a wave of her hand, the ice shattered, and every fragment morphed into a sharp blade that shot straight at A-Tai.

A-Tai fanned himself even higher into the air, flinging up his arms to shield his face as he enveloped himself in flames. The ice blades dissolved in the wall of wind and fire he’d erected.

The dark lady sneered. She whirled and disappeared with a rush of air, transforming into snowflakes that scattered across the sky.

On the plain below, the black deer had finished wrapping the wolf in dark mist from his antlers. He transformed midair into Lu Xu, intending to make a run for it.

The moment his feet touched the ground, Ashina Adarvan appeared in front of him.

“Ha!” His knives streaked toward Lu Xu, who reeled backward to dodge them. Ashina Adarvan lunged, so fast he was a blur, and collided with Lu Xu. Groping for Ashina Adarvan’s fallen knives, Lu Xu launched swiftly into an attack.

Lu Xu and Ashina Adarvan moved with such speed that the falling snow appeared frozen in midair; they flew at each other in a flash, knives clanging brightly. The snowflakes were halved on the edges of their blades as they slashed through the air—within a heartbeat, they’d exchanged more than twenty blows.

How is he so fast?! Ashina Adarvan had no time to ruminate as he stabbed and parried, guided by pure instinct. Snowflakes burst into ice crystals around them as they traded punches and kicks, the glare off their knives blinding. They’d gone five more rounds when something popped out of the snow near their feet.

“The oblivion pollen’s here!”

A stunned Lu Xu took a burst of pollen to the face, courtesy of the carp yao, who’d been hiding just under the snow. He sneezed, confusion flickering through his eyes. Having finally spotted an opening, Ashina Adarvan spun back and kicked Lu Xu in the chest. “Take *that*!”

Lu Xu faltered—a misstep that would be his undoing. He was sent flying backward just as the gray wolf broke free of his black-mist bonds. The great beast soared through the air, opening his jaws.

Lu Xu shifted into a deer again and pivoted elegantly in midair, ready to dash away. But the gray wolf was already upon him, teeth clamping down on the deer’s foreleg. Growling, he dragged the deer to the ground and flung him toward the boulder.

“Hongjun!” the gray wolf called. “Cut off his antlers!”

His chance had come at last. Hongjun leapt from behind the boulder, raising his saber high. The black deer jerked his head up, inky mist curling from his antlers, but the gray wolf kept him pinned to the ground. Hongjun brought his saber down, and the crisp sound of gold and jade shattering filled the air as blinding light burst from the saber—its blade had chipped.

Hongjun gave a wordless yell, tightening his grip on his weapon. A saber glare burst forth as he brought the blade down once again.

Black flames exploded from the deer's body, the force pushing everyone back. The antlers, cleft from the deer's brow, lay stark on the white snow. Hongjun's hands shook uncontrollably. Keeping his grip on the saber through the recoil of that final strike had drained what remained of his strength. A few paces away, the deer lay on his side convulsing as thick black smoke billowed from the severed antlers and wound toward the sky.

"You… How did you know to cut the antlers?" Hongjun could hardly feel his arms. Too weak to hold onto the saber, he let it clatter onto the frozen ground.

The gray wolf shifted back into Mergen. "The chief… He made a guess. Lu Xu? Lu Xu!"

The black deer shrank as he transformed, until he was once again Lu Xu, lying unconscious in the snow. Blood flowed freely from the wound Mergen's teeth had made on his left arm as his black robes gradually faded to white.

"Lu Xu?" Hongjun stumbled forward, cradling Lu Xu in his arms. Mergen and Ashina Adarvan hurried toward them.

The ghost king's roars still echoed over the plains. The corpse-ghost legion around them gradually collapsed, swords and armor clattering as its soldiers crumpled to the ground one after another. Heart spasming painfully, Li Jinglong took half a step back and lowered his sword.

The storm had dispersed; stars shone again in the night sky, their pale light illuminating the armored corpses littering the ground. The ghost king, as colossal as a mountain, toppled forward and landed heavily in front of Liu Fei, now nothing but a withered skeleton leaning quietly against a boulder. His long hair, fallen beside his bones, fluttered in the breeze as the ghost king's majestic figure knelt motionless before him.

Li Jinglong only managed to stay upright by supporting himself with his sword, his eyes vacant. The Great Tang soldiers on the battlefield around them looked about in confusion.

The first rays of dawn speared over the horizon, shining onto the Great Wall. In the long shadow of the mountains, Mergen approached the ghost king and pressed his palm to the corpse's forehead, murmuring an

incantation under his breath. All was still—there was no more black mist to be expelled.

“I don’t know if I can wake him,” Mergen said.

Hongjun, A-Tai, Li Jinglong, and Ashina Adarvan watched the ghost king in silence. The man was half a head taller than Li Jinglong and powerfully built, his Qin-dynasty armor as indestructible as the mountains. His eyes were tightly shut.

At last, he spoke: “I had a long, long dream…”

His voice was as hoarse as Liu Fei’s. He slowly opened his eyes. The others stepped back in unison, looking warily at the ghost king.

“In that dream, I killed my comrade, my dearest friend,” said the ghost king.

His eyes were no longer clouded over; they had cleared, just as Liu Fei’s had when he woke from his slumber. Unlike Liu Fei, the color of his skin was almost the same as a mortal’s, neither discolored nor dry. The only sign he was a corpse was the unnaturally pale gray of his eyes.

“Now, who can tell me—was it real or not?” asked the ghost king.

No one said anything. The exorcists watched him quietly as he sat up, his back to the Great Wall, and tilted his face to the clear blue sky. “I haven’t seen daylight for so long…”

A breeze swept through the valley. Hongjun turned to make his way across the corpse-ghost littered plain, picking his way toward the center of the battlefield until he stood before Liu Fei’s bones. The corpse general’s rusty armor lay in pieces around his collapsed skeleton, his empty eye sockets gazing up at the clouds. The blade of his king’s dagger-axe was still lodged between his shattered ribs.

“You weren’t cursed for eternity, Liu Fei,” Hongjun murmured.

As he stood on that snowy battlefield, he had yet to understand the purpose of eternal life, or that of death.

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Chapter 64:
The Seven Emotions and Six Desires

A SHORT DISTANCE away, the ghost king was listening quietly as Li Jinglong explained everything that had transpired.

“That’s how we ended up here,” Li Jinglong concluded, waiting for the ghost king’s response. The ghost king rose slowly, heaving a long sigh.

Hongjun, gazing down at Liu Fei’s skeleton, suddenly heard the slow *thwack thwack* of a rattle drum. The ghost king walked toward the center of the snowy plain, still strewn with corpses, the child’s toy in his hand. Everyone rose and followed behind him.

He solemnly put on his helmet. As the drum sounded again and again, the earth beneath their feet seemed to undergo a peculiar change.

Thwack—

The undead soldiers rose from the snow, one after another.

Hongjun took a few steps back, staring at the ghost king in shock as all two hundred thousand corpse ghosts came alive amid the thwack of the drum, seizing the weapons beside them as they climbed to their feet.

Nervous, Li Jinglong and the others gave Hongjun a look, gesturing for him to come closer—none of them wanted to be attacked by a swarm of undead soldiers a second time. But the soldiers appeared subdued; they made no move toward the mortals but instead retreated into a square formation at the bottom of the valley in an orderly fashion before sheathing their rusty weapons.

Thwack, thwack—

The beats of the rattle drum reverberated across the snowy plains, echoing forlornly. For a moment, all was silent—even the breeze stilled. Only the rhythmic sound of the ghost king’s rattle drum shook the heavens and earth.

At the front of the formation appeared twenty division commanders, each commanding ten thousand soldiers. These divisions were split again

into ten regiments, helmed by ten mounted regiment commanders. The regiment commanders rode through the formation to the front, followed by the battalion commanders and the platoon and squad leaders. The army of two hundred thousand soldiers swiftly fell into line to the beat of the little drum.

The members of the Department of Exorcism traded looks of astonishment.

That was a close call, Li Jinglong thought. The corpse-ghost army had obviously fought until now without any strategic direction. If the ghost king had been fully under the dark lady's control, the night's battle would have had a vastly different outcome.

The rattle drum fell silent. The teeming mass of undead soldiers stood in ranks at the mouth of the canyon, their heads bowed, blotting out the snowy plains beneath a sea of black.

The ghost king still held his helmet in his hands. One of the division commanders rode forward, removed the wineskin he carried, and poured wine into the helmet.

"What's he doing?" the carp yao asked.

"Shh." Li Jinglong again beckoned Hongjun over. The exorcists huddled to the side, watching the ghost king stand before his two hundred thousand soldiers with Liu Fei's skeleton at his feet in the snow.

Hongjun suddenly found himself hoping the ghost king had some spiritual technique that could resurrect Liu Fei.

The ghost king's deep voice boomed over the plain as he intoned, "Before the creation of the world, who gave it its natural order? Before the formation of heaven and earth, what provided their pattern? Before the separation of light and dark, who could have made sense of them?"

He raised his helmet to the sky like a goblet and concluded, "O vastness of life and death that goes on without end—until dreams embrace us!"

The undead soldiers fell to one knee, the echoes of their sheathed swords hitting the ground filling the canyon like the roars of a flight of dragons. The exorcists watched the ghost king with bated breath. Just as

when Liu Fei had concocted the antidote to the corpse poison, Hongjun sensed the stirring of a powerful force that defied life and death.

The ghost king held his helmet in his left hand, dipping the fingers of his right into the wine before flicking them skyward. “To the vast azure skies above, the origin of the myriad forms.”

He flicked his fingers at the ground. “To the fertile soil of the Divine Land, the final destination of all living things.”

The ghost king splashed the wine in his helmet onto Liu Fei’s bones, his voice rumbling, “A toast to my dear friend the King of Jiangdu, who is finally free from suffering.”

At this, the soldiers raised their heads in unison. As the wind rose from the plains, Liu Fei’s skeleton dissolved into countless motes of light that rode the swirling gale into the brightening sky. As everyone watched, the dust drifted upward, shimmering like a river of silver stars, as fleeting as a wisp of smoke as it marked a trail to the heavens before disappearing on the breath of the wind.

Could a person really become a corpse ghost after death and live on in the mortal world? Hongjun couldn’t help but think of his deceased parents.

As they rode side by side a short while later, Li Jinglong asked Hongjun, “Do you remember your first time encountering death?”

The ghost king had dismissed his host and kept only twelve personal guards with him. Mergen rode with the unconscious Lu Xu in his arms as he galloped beside A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan toward the edge of the snowy plain, following the ghost king and his retinue. None of them had asked the ghost king where they were going—they had all fallen silent after the ritual, especially Mergen, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan. It had been their first time witnessing this sort of spiritual technique that spanned the realms of both life and death, and the sight of it brought many abstruse questions to the forefront of their minds.

Hongjun slowed his horse’s pace as he pondered Li Jinglong’s question. If he didn’t count his parents’ deaths as a child, which he’d only seen in a dream, his first time encountering death was probably a certain incident back in Yaojin Palace.

“I brought a bird back from the foot of the mountain,” Hongjun started hesitantly. “A really, really old bird. I begged Chong Ming to save it, but he said, ‘All mortal beings meet their end eventually. I can cure disease, but I cannot defy fate.’ That was the first time I learned what death was.”

“And what do you think death is?” Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun’s mind immediately strayed back to his parents. Seeing how melancholy he looked, Li Jinglong quickly added, “I was just wondering.”

Glancing up, Hongjun could see the anxiety on Li Jinglong’s face. Li Jinglong hadn’t failed to notice that Hongjun had kept his distance ever since he’d woken from his nightmare. He’d been hesitant throughout the journey, even if he never said so. He clearly wanted an excuse to talk to Hongjun, but in his agitation, he broached a topic Hongjun would prefer to avoid.

“Death is like the way a caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly that returns to the skies,” the ghost king interjected. He slowed his horse as well to keep pace with them. “The way snow melts into water that seeps back into the soil; the way a drop of water falls into a stream, which feeds into a river, a lake, or an ocean. After death, you will no longer distinguish between yourself and the world.”

It was nearing dusk when a line of sprawling stone cliffs rose in the distance. The rock face cut straight through the mountains, more than thirty yards tall. Embedded in the cliff was a massive, nine-storied pagoda, its carved wooden balconies and railings painted in red lacquer.

“These are the Mogao Caves!” the carp yao exclaimed, answering Hongjun’s unvoiced question.

The ghost king and his guards dismounted. Several living soldiers, standing guard outside the pagoda, raised their weapons when they saw visitors, barking, “Who goes there?”

Li Jinglong hastily identified himself with the token fastened to his waist, but the ghost king was already striding inside, his cape billowing behind him.

“Come in,” said the ghost king. His tone left no room for questions.

Within the first hall stood a massive statue of the seated Maitreya Buddha; one of his hands was resting palm up on his lap, while the other draped over his leg toward the ground. The ghost king was more familiar with this place than his own home. Producing a length of rope with a jade pendant hanging from it, he swung his arm in a few circles and then released—the gleaming pendant arced through the air to land on the Buddha's open palm with a soft *clink*.

"Ghost King—" Li Jinglong began.

The ghost king halted everyone with a raised hand and ascended a wooden staircase at the side of the hall, while his guards arrayed themselves at the foot of the stairs. The exorcists followed him one by one to the fifth floor, where they were greeted by a magnificent view. As frigid winds scraped mercilessly past their cheeks, the ghost king led everyone into a brightly lit chamber. Here, there were no sculptures or statues, only vibrant murals on all four walls and some cattail prayer mats on the ground.

"How may we address you?" Li Jinglong asked, inclining his head respectfully.

"I've long since forgotten my original name," replied the ghost king gravely. "Call me the ghost king as you've always done. Have a seat; make yourselves comfortable. This is the sacred site of our clan of the living dead."

The ghost king glanced toward Mergen, still carrying Lu Xu's limp body in his arms. "Set him down there," he said, pointing at a spot at the foot of one of the murals.

Mergen laid him down, and the ghost king removed his own cape and covered Lu Xu with it.

Li Jinglong peered around, studying the murals carefully. Thinking back to the sand snake yao's words, he asked, "Where is the mural the dark lady and the plague god use to contact the yao king?"

"That sycophantic reptile no longer dares come here," answered the ghost king. "Now that I've been awakened from those dreams, I rule this place. You are safe from him as long as you're inside the Mogao Caves."

Li Jinglong heaved a sigh of relief, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion.

“If you’re as powerful as you claim,” A-Tai said, “How did you end up under their control in the first place?”

The ghost king turned to look at Lu Xu, his meaning self-evident. “The white deer should have been reincarnated as the guardian of the night in the mortal realm eighteen years ago,” he said slowly. “However, the black jiao Xie Yu laid a trap for it, robbing the spiritual beast of two immortal souls and six mortal forms and leaving it to reincarnate with only one of each.”

Everyone was shocked—it was exactly as Li Jinglong had guessed. Mergen instantly tensed. Li Jinglong raised a hand, gesturing for him to remain calm.

“Sit,” the ghost king commanded when he noticed Hongjun still studying the mural.

Hongjun gave the ghost king a look before nodding and choosing a cattail prayer rug for himself. Instead of joining Li Jinglong, he settled down next to Ashina Adarvan at the edge of the group.

“Come here.” The ghost king pointed calmly to the empty space beside Mergen.

When Hongjun remained silent, the ghost king continued, “Chong Ming and I are old acquaintances; you should address me as your uncle. You aren’t this disobedient at home, are you?”

Now it was Hongjun’s turn to be surprised. “You—”

“Whatever you wish to ask, I’ll give you my answer later.” There was a commanding sternness in the ghost king’s tone, as of a family elder; Hongjun had little choice but to obey. The ghost king’s gaze followed him as he moved to sit beside Mergen.

“When will Lu Xu recover?” Mergen asked.

“Maybe soon,” said the ghost king placidly. “Maybe never. This depends on what all of you choose to do.”

Mergen was first to take his meaning. He promptly asked, “Then, what should we do?”

The ghost king was silent. It was Li Jinglong who cut straight to the point: “What happened to his missing immortal souls and mortal forms?”

The ghost king's brow furrowed slightly as he sat cross-legged on the floor. After some thought, he answered at last. "They unified into a demon. Everything begins with Xie Yu's lifelong determination to resurrect Mara. Nearly four hundred years have passed since the black jiao escaped the Dragon-Quelling Tower. All these years, the yao race has never truly been ruled by any king."

Hongjun knew what the ghost king said next would almost certainly touch on his own past. He listened quietly, hardly daring to breathe.

The yao of the Divine Land, the ghost king explained, originally had no rightful ruler. Rather, weaker yao came to revere certain individuals as kings—powerful yao hailing from noble clans with robust spiritual power, such as the fallen-corpse-ghost king, the nine-tailed celestial fox, the divine kun, and the golden-winged great peng.

These four great yao were often addressed respectfully as kings, but they did not rule in any literal sense. The ghost king himself had never imagined a future in which he ruled over all yao in the Divine Land, establishing a new world order. Almost a thousand years passed this way, and the yao remained divided, as detached from one another as singular particles of sand.

"That's pretty nice, isn't it?" A-Tai mused. "If there's no war, there will be no death or extinction."

Ashina Adarvan shook his head with a grimace.

"Yao are not like you humans," the ghost king said slowly. "We must cultivate for decades or centuries to acquire sentience, and the path is exceedingly difficult—for this reason, yao tend to greatly value their lives and will not give up their cultivation easily. Yet there is without a doubt one being who possesses absolute power over all yao: the heavenly demon Mara."

His words set everyone's hearts racing.

"Mara is the manifestation of the malign energies of the mortal world, which reincarnate as the great demon once every thousand years," Li Jinglong said, unruffled. "But there's still something I don't understand. Why must all yao obey Mara's command? Can you not just go on with your lives and cultivate as usual?"

“Because yao are not like humans,” repeated the ghost king. “Aside from the nine-tailed celestial fox, yao are inherently unable to resist Mara’s incursions. We may not wish to obey, but we have no choice.”

“Why not?” Hongjun asked.

“If I am to explain in detail,” said the ghost king after consideration, “then this will be a long tale. Are you sure you want to hear it now?”

As Hongjun hesitated, Li Jinglong said, “It can wait until later.”

The ghost king thought for a moment before offering a shortened explanation. “Yao are deeply entrenched in malign energies. They cultivate in order to gain a human form, and yet they struggle to abandon the bloodthirstiness and avarice rooted in their base natures. Many humans, on the other hand, manage to persevere even in situations of hopelessness and despair.”

“But as long as they’re determined in their pursuit of goodness,” Mergen protested, “surely they can eventually become—”

“What would they become?” the ghost king interjected. “Sages? Buddhas?”

Hongjun looked up at the mural. Everyone took the ghost king’s meaning. The potential for Buddhahood existed within every being, this much was true—but if a yaoguai cultivated to the point of becoming a Buddha, it would no longer be a yao.

“Mara reincarnates once every thousand years,” said the ghost king. “Its birth is a great calamity, impacting every living thing on earth. We yao have no recourse when it comes to this—we are not willing to submit to Mara, but we have no choice. However, when Xie Yu came to visit me two centuries ago, he told me of a plan to unite all yao. He claimed he’d be the highest ruler, making the other four yao kings bend the knee to him as he gathered all yaoguai in the Divine Land before the birth of Mara—this was so he could command us in Mara’s stead.”

The carp yao chose this moment to pipe up: “But he was forced to flee after his fight with Chong Ming.”

“Precisely,” the ghost king said. “In a bid to prove he had a rightful claim, Xie Yu challenged the ruler of Yaojin Palace. The fight ended badly

for both parties. The phoenix, afflicted with fire venom, swore never to concern himself with the affairs of the mortal world again. Xie Yu became the ruler of all yao in the Divine Land in name, but he'd also suffered serious injuries; he spent most of the following two centuries licking his wounds."

"Until two decades ago," Li Jinglong murmured.

The ghost king nodded. "Indeed. Mara shouldn't reincarnate for another century, but Xie Yu has already located its vessel."

Mergen instinctively shot a glance at Hongjun, whose heart thumped wildly.

"Who is it?" Li Jinglong asked.

"I have no idea," the ghost king answered. "What I *am* certain of, however, is that this vessel is currently within Xie Yu's grasp."

Only then did Hongjun breathe a soft sigh of relief. Mergen smiled and nodded at him, as if to say, *See?*

Li Jinglong didn't comment on this exchange. After a pause, he turned back to the ghost king. "Why do you say that?"

"The second time Xie Yu appeared before me," the ghost king explained, "he could already control demonic energy and had used it to corrode several other yao. The nine-tailed fox submitted to him willingly; many other yao clans in the Divine Land have also pledged their allegiance."

"He didn't succeed in swaying you to his cause, though," Ashina Adarvan said as he studied the ghost king.

"Aside from the three sage-kings of Yaojin Palace and the divine kun of the North Sea, I am the oldest yao in the Divine Land," the ghost king replied disdainfully. "Xie Yu is a snake who has cultivated for no more than five centuries. What power does he have over me?"

Li Jinglong suddenly recalled the so-called divine kun with the black blindfold over his eyes. His mind raced. The events that had dragged him and Hongjun into this complicated feud between yao clans had seemed a series of perfectly reasonable coincidences—but how many of them had been orchestrated by these great yao working in the deep currents beneath

the surface? The golden-winged great peng had appeared just as the nine-tailed fox was on the brink of death, and the divine kun had asked him and Hongjun specifically for one corpse and one soul. The latter incident continued to baffle Li Jinglong even now; he resolved that he would demand clear answers if they should meet again.

The rest of the ghost king's tale went without saying. After failing to recruit him, Xie Yu altered his plans and seized most of the white deer's soul. In the dozen years that followed, he harnessed demonic energy to repeatedly refine the white deer's two immortal souls and six mortal forms, corroding it in a slow process. When he was satisfied with his black deer, he used it to infiltrate the ghost king and Liu Fei's dreams and thereby gained control over them.

After some consideration, the ghost king announced, "You will have to face Xie Yu eventually. No matter where and when this battle takes place, I promise you this: I will lead my army into the Central Plains to avenge Liu Fei. I would ask all of you to forgive me for this when the time comes."

Forgive him, he said—yet his words brooked no refusal. Li Jinglong grimaced internally. *As if it would stop you if I refused!*

"In that case," Mergen said at last, "what can I do to turn Lu Xu back into the white deer?"

He picked up the deer's antlers, which he'd deposited beside him on the cattail mat. They'd remained pitch-black even after Hongjun sheared them from Lu Xu's brow.

"When you severed his antlers, he lost his spiritual power. Once he wakes, you must try exorcizing the demonic energy within him," answered the ghost king. "I am aware of only two ways to do this. The first is to shine the heart lamp directly on his soul; the second is to merge the six artifacts of Acalanatha into a single arrow and shoot it into his heart."

Everyone looked at Li Jinglong, who appeared somewhat overwhelmed by this huge responsibility. He asked, "Should we use the heart lamp? Of course I'll help him however I can as long as it's within my power—but how is it supposed to work?"

The ghost king replied solemnly with a question of his own: "How deep is your bond with the white deer—are you willing to lay your lives on

the line for each other?”

Li Jinglong was at something of a loss. He glanced at Mergen, then at Hongjun.

“Their bond?” Mergen asked.

“If you are to shine the heart lamp on his soul, you must have perfect trust in him, and have earned his trust in return,” said the ghost king. “The pollution of the soul through demonic energy begins from desire. Human desire is born from emotion, and desire, in turn, brings forth intent. Intent is what sets everything into motion and changes the world. But with desire comes yearning. When one fails to obtain what one yearns for, resentment —malign energy—is born. And when this malign energy festers and intensifies, it transforms into a demon. If you wish to exorcize this demon, you must give up your seven emotions and six desires. Only then can you use the heart lamp to cleanse the malign energies infecting this young man’s soul.”

Both Mergen and Li Jinglong were speechless. A-Tai traded a look with Ashina Adarvan, then pronounced, “Then this won’t be easy.”

“I don’t get it,” Hongjun said. “What does all that mean?”

“Joy, anger, worry, fear, love, hatred, and desire,” the ghost king intoned. “These are the seven emotions. Desire directed toward another’s physical body, their demeanor, comportment, voice, the smoothness of their skin, the beauty of their features—these are what we call the six desires.[3] This kind of exorcism will not work if you merely wish to offer him salvation from on high; you must discover how he came to be what he is. When he regains consciousness, you must influence him with your seven emotions and desires, then shine your heart lamp on his soul—only then may you succeed in purifying him.”

His words brought odd expressions to everyone’s faces. Li Jinglong and Mergen exchanged a look, both appearing bewildered.

“Uh… So we need to locate these polluted areas of his soul?” Hongjun asked.

“Basically,” the carp yao said from beside him, “after he wakes up, the chief has to develop affection for him, become angry at him, worry about him, then fear him, love him, hate him, and want his—”

“Stop, stop, stop!” Li Jinglong and Mergen shouted in unison.

Hongjun was struck silent—but not the carp yao, whose words continued like a barrage of cannonballs. “The chief has to fall for him at first sight; obsess over his beauty, his every gesture. He has to love listening to Lu Xu’s voice; touch the smooth skin of his body; and finally, do the deed with him.”

“*Shut up!*” Li Jinglong roared in fury.

A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan burst into raucous laughter. “I’m sorry,” A-Tai cackled to Mergen, who was on the brink of losing his mind. “I know I should be taking this seriously, but it’s way too funny…”

“That’s impossible!” Li Jinglong exclaimed. “Ghost King, I’ve exterminated quite a number…quite a number of yao—and even awakened *you*—with the Sword of Wisdom, and I’ve never felt any of those emotions and desires.”

“Demonic energy doesn’t merely afflict his body, Exorcist, but his soul,” the ghost king said. “This is a different case.”

Hongjun couldn’t believe what he’d just heard—it seemed preposterous. “But then, if the chief wants to exterminate Mara,” he began, “doesn’t that mean he also has to love it, touch it, and do the deed with it too?”

Li Jinglong groaned. “Stop talking…”

“With Mara, one might directly attack the demon seed with an arrow merged from the six artifacts of Acalanatha and so let it disperse into the heavenly and earthly meridians,” the ghost king said. “However, the white deer’s soul is fully corrupted. If you’re willing to kill him, naturally, that would solve everything.”

Everyone looked at Lu Xu, who made a pitiful sight lying alone beneath the murals.

“That is all the advice I can give you,” concluded the ghost king. “Act at your own discretion.”

So saying, he abruptly got up and left.

A-Tai massaged his brow in consternation. “The ghost king has really outdone himself here—he split up two of our department’s couples in one

go and made you exchange partners too! Hongjun, perhaps you would consider falling for our Shiwei prince here."

"A-Tai, what on earth are you saying?" Hongjun asked helplessly.

The carp yao raised both hairy arms high. "I second this!"

Li Jinglong had nothing to say in response.

Ashina Adarvan was laughing so hard he couldn't sit up straight. Mergen looked at Li Jinglong, feeling dizzy. After a while, he ground out, "This is impossible."

"Can I give my heart lamp to you temporarily?" Li Jinglong asked.

When Hongjun looked at Lu Xu, his heart ached. He didn't know what to do. For some reason, he'd felt discomfited by the carp yao's explanation earlier; he couldn't help but glance at Li Jinglong. But when he thought how Lu Xu had lived without two immortal souls and six mortal forms since he was born, he felt like crying.

"You can't," Hongjun said. "I tried to remove it once."

Mergen held up a hand. "Give me a moment to digest this. There must be some other way… There must be."

He heaved a sigh, then got up and left the chamber. The rest of the group trickled out after him, offering their own excuses, until only Hongjun and Li Jinglong remained, sitting a short distance from each other beneath the murals.

"Um… Hongjun?" As he saw the conflicted look on Hongjun's face, Li Jinglong's expression changed. He pulled a prayer mat over and sat opposite Hongjun, studying his face. He wanted to refute what the carp yao had said, but Hongjun was obviously distracted.

Hongjun's mind was still on the ghost king. After living for more than a thousand years, the yaoguai knew far too many secrets about the mortal world.

"I'll go for a walk too," Hongjun said. "You can…take some time to think things over."

He fled, leaving Li Jinglong alone and speechless. The carp yao scurried over and stopped at the door, glancing slyly at Li Jinglong with one

eye. “I’m also going out for some fresh air.”

“No one cares about you!” Li Jinglong snapped, having finally reached the limits of his patience.

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Chapter 65:
His Descent to Earth, as Destined

FINE SNOW had begun to fall outside. As Hongjun looked up toward the third floor, where the ghost king stood with his cape billowing behind him, one of the king's personal guards came over.

"Your Highness," said the guard from behind Hongjun, "His Majesty has asked for you."

"You can talk?!" Hongjun exclaimed in surprise.

"All of us can," answered the guard. "But we don't speak in front of mortals unless necessary. Please come with me."

"Why did you call me 'Your Highness,' though?"

The guard didn't answer. He merely led Hongjun upstairs in polite silence. As they passed a stone staircase, Hongjun looked down to see Mergen on the second floor, staring into space, and Ashina Adarvan wandering around studying the murals in the grottoes.

Over a thousand grottoes made up the Mogao Caves. Artists gathered in small groups in the corridors on the other floors, listening to the melodious notes of A-Tai's barbat drifting in the wind. It was only when he spotted a large group of soldiers from the Yumen Army gathered at the foot of the nine-storied pagoda that Hongjun realized the sheer number of people here. He hadn't seen any of them when they arrived, but all of them had emerged now. The caves were bustling with noise and activity, as busy and thriving as a small town.

Hongjun had been worried another conflict would break out when the ghost king and his guards arrived here, but he spotted Li Jinglong speaking to the soldiers in front of the building. Seeing that Li Jinglong would deal with the situation, he was no longer anxious about it.

He followed the guard up two floors, passing many more caves with murals on the walls. The artists taking a break outside pressed their palms together and bowed as the guard strode past. Evidently corpse ghosts were a familiar sight here. Hongjun turned to the artists and bowed as well. The

guard nodded toward them before leading Hongjun up the stairs again to the center of the cave complex and entering one of the grottoes.

There, an artist was painting a bodhisattva—a gentle deity with pale skin and a benevolent gaze. Behind the bodhisattva, apsaras flew through the air, their colorful scarves billowing behind them. A fire burned merrily in the grotto, combating the bitter cold of the twelfth month. The artist, a young man not much older than Hongjun himself, wore nothing but a loose pair of pants, his torso exposed and his feet bare. He perched cross-legged atop the scaffolding as he rendered the bodhisattva's arms stroke by stroke with a devout expression.

"Do you know this bodhisattva?" asked the ghost king.

Hongjun shook his head, surprised to see someone so young here. There were more than a thousand artists in the Mogao Caves; each artist or group had one grotto to themselves. They carved sculptures of stone or wood, molded them from clay, or painted colorful murals portraying the glory of the myriad celestial beings, their art commanding the respect of everyone who beheld it.

Hongjun's soul trembled at the sight of the young artist's bodhisattva; he was nearly breathless with wonder. As he stood in front of the mural, he felt as if he was transported to a world far away yet no less real than his own, where all the gods and buddhas in the heavens scrutinized his heart and soul, their gazes filled with pity.

Upon noticing their arrival, the artist set down his brush. He pressed his palms together and bowed to Hongjun before climbing down the scaffolding and taking his leave from the grotto.

"The bodhisattva is Mahasthamaprapta,"[4] said the ghost king, "who freed all beings from the tyranny of murder and war. The Mogao Caves are also known as the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas. After living a mediocre life, some ordinary mortals spend all their wealth paying these young artists to sculpt or paint the Buddha in murals so they will be delivered from suffering. Every time I make my pilgrimage to the Mogao Caves, I wonder —do the bodhisattvas protect the yao race as well?"

"These artists don't seem to fear you," Hongjun said. "Do they know you?"

“They do,” said the ghost king. “The people here call us Asuras.”

The ghost king lowered his head, studying Hongjun’s face. “You look like someone I’ve met before. Forgive me; I’ve encountered too many people in this life—my memories run together over the years, and I can’t remember who it is you resemble.”

Hongjun laid his jade peacock feather on his palm, showing it to the ghost king.

After a brief silence, the ghost king picked up the feather. “The pentacolor sacred light… You are Kong Xuan’s child. That day…”

Hongjun jerked in shock. “You’ve met my dad?”

The ghost king turned to look at him.

Upon seeing the ghost king’s furrowed brow, Hongjun knew instantly that there was history between this corpse ghost and Yaojin Palace. Sucking in a breath, he asked, “Ghost King, what was my father like?”

The ghost king turned and walked out of the grotto. Hongjun chased after him as his long strides took him up the stone stairs until they arrived outside a hall on the topmost floor. The sun was setting in the west, sinking over the Great Wall that wound beyond Yumen Pass and into the desert.

Hongjun was desperate to know more about his father. He hadn’t asked his uncle Jia Zhou this question because his father would have presented himself as a mortal in front of him. He’d never asked Chong Ming or Qing Xiong either. Neither of them had said so outright, but it was clear that they wanted him to look for the answers himself.

Conversely, to Hongjun, the ghost king felt like a long-lost friend of the yao race: his father’s peer.

The ghost king sat down and gestured for Hongjun to do the same. Perplexed, Hongjun stared at the ghost king in a daze.

“When you mentioned Chong Ming on the way here,” said the ghost king, “I had a feeling you might be the son of someone I once knew. How are your parents faring?”

“Both of them have passed,” Hongjun said gloomily.

The ghost king appeared unsurprised—he slumbered in his grave for a decade at a time and thus had no idea what went on in the mortal world for large stretches. But Hongjun's ownership of the pentacolor sacred light likely meant his father was gone.

Thus, the ghost king merely nodded, lost in thought as he said, "He sought me out in Hexi that day. We sat in this exact spot."

A strange feeling surged in Hongjun's heart. The ghost king mused, "I woke from my slumber only to realize so many years had passed without my knowledge."

"Back then… Why did he come here?" Hongjun asked.

The ghost king studied Hongjun. "He wanted to entrust you to me, and have Liu Fei and I bring you up."

Hongjun was shocked into silence.

"I have nothing but a lone grave," the ghost king murmured, almost to himself. "Liu Fei took a great liking to you, but spending an extended period of time in a mausoleum would become depressing for any child. Thinking back on it, it's fortunate we made the choice we did that day and didn't let you stay."

"I was a burden to him," Hongjun said in a low voice.

"You weren't." When the ghost king noticed how disheartened Hongjun was, he quickly added, "Why would you say that? You were constantly targeted by yao during your childhood because of your unique constitution. Your father needed to deal with Xie Yu, but he was afraid it would be difficult for him to keep both you and your mother safe."

Hongjun supposed this made sense. He nodded gratefully.

The ghost king laid a hand on Hongjun's shoulder. "Chong Ming brought you up well." Noticing Hongjun was still in low spirits, he added, "Of course, you would have had fairer skin if you'd stayed with me."

This finally got a laugh out of Hongjun. The ghost king mused, "When your father traveled from Yumen Pass to meet me, he kept it secret from your mother. The fact that the white deer managed to retain even one immortal soul and one mortal form likely has something to do with you as well."

“What?!” It had never occurred to Hongjun that his father might have been involved in the white deer’s reincarnation.

“You didn’t know?” the ghost king asked nonchalantly. “Not long after our meeting all those years ago, he guessed Xie Yu’s intention to abduct the white deer. Your father attempted to stop Xie Yu by disrupting his spiritual technique.”

Hongjun’s breath caught. Was this why Lu Xu seemed to regard him differently than the others?

After hearing Hongjun’s description of Lu Xu’s behavior, the ghost king agreed, “That must be it. The white deer must’ve met your father in spirit form before its reincarnation. You resemble your father greatly, so he recognized you.”

Hongjun nodded. He took a deep breath before asking, “Why…” His heart was pounding wildly. “Why did all those yao…come for me?”

In his dream, his parents had moved constantly to escape the yao that pursued them. His child self had also said a monster lived in his body.

The ghost king thought for a spell before answering. “I think you should ask your adoptive father about this. Surely no one knows better than him how those events unfolded.”

Hongjun had expected anything but this answer. “Ghost King… I mean, Uncle Ghost King,” Hongjun pressed. “Tell me. You must know something about it—you must!”

The ghost king fell silent again. Hongjun watched him anxiously, his brow tightly furrowed, which earned him a bemused glance. “Did they send you down the mountain to seek out that boy with the heart lamp?” the ghost king asked.

This question only confused Hongjun further. He thought about everything that had happened, then grabbed the ghost king’s arm and spilled out the whole story, starting from when Qing Xiong had first sent him down the mountain and entrusted him with three tasks and the heart lamp.

“So that’s how it is…” the ghost king said in a low voice. “If that’s so…I don’t think they plan on keeping this from you.”

“Then why did those yao want me?” Hongjun asked once again, agitated.

The ghost king studied Hongjun in silence. Only after a long moment did he say, “You aren’t prepared to accept the reason, little peacock.”

“I just want to know what happened to me,” Hongjun said plaintively.

“If it were possible to go back in time and choose,” the ghost king asked, “would you wish to be born into this world?”

“I don’t want to hear things like that anymore!” Hongjun exploded. “You guys have all the answers, so why won’t any of you tell me anything?”

“Answer me,” replied the ghost king seriously, the steely hint of command in his tone reminding Hongjun of all the times Chong Ming had told him off.

“I…” Hongjun’s thoughts were a knotted mess. But for some reason, what came to the fore was the joy he felt when he was with everyone in the Department of Exorcism.

“Of course—it’s great to be alive,” Hongjun answered.

“Even if you died tomorrow, you would harbor no regrets?” asked the ghost king. “This is of utmost importance, little peacock.”

Hongjun said, resigned, “What’s there to regret? I…”

The ghost king nodded. “If that’s so, I don’t see why I can’t tell you this. You were born eighteen years ago to save your father from the ordeal he was destined to endure.”

Hongjun was stupefied.

The ghost king formed a sword seal with one hand and touched his own brow, then slowly drew his hand away. His fingers emitted a gentle blue glow when he tapped them lightly on Hongjun’s temple.

A soft hum filled Hongjun’s ears as his consciousness was dragged into the ghost king’s memories.

Eighteen years ago, Kong Xuan sat cross-legged at the highest point of the Mogao Caves, exactly where the present Hongjun was sitting now.

The sun was setting as Hongjun—then a toddler—slept against Kong Xuan's chest, his small head lolling to the side.

"Xie Yu is still searching for the demon seed of Mara," murmured Kong Xuan. "I've tried everything, but I can't extricate it from Xing-er's soul."

"You got what you wanted," said the ghost king grimly. "Was this not precisely what those two brothers of yours advised you to do?"

"I didn't know it would feel like this." Kong Xuan's gaze was distant, his voice hoarse. "I didn't expect having a son to be such a joyful thing."

"*You* were the one destined to become Mara."

"That's right," Kong Xuan replied. "It should have been me, over a hundred years from now."

The evening light bathed the Mogao Caves in its golden glow, falling upon the benevolent faces of the hundreds of thousands of Buddhas within the grottoes.

"He who ties the bell to the tiger must be the one to untie it," advised the ghost king. "You refuse to ask your brothers for help, but what use is there in stumbling around like this in the mortal realm?"

Kong Xuan sighed. "Chong Ming and Qing Xiong wanted me to pick a mortal woman at random and teach her the Yin-Yang Conception Technique so I could plant the demon seed within her, where it would grow into a demonic fetus. They didn't care what happened after; my life is all that matters to them. But even they didn't predict I'd fall in love. I cannot part with Yuze, nor can I sit idly by and watch Xing-er descend into demonhood. I've been searching far and wide for a remedy."

"It's not that I don't want to help you, Kong Xuan," the ghost king replied. "But even if your son were to turn into a corpse ghost, the demon seed cannot be destroyed. The only thing that will achieve that is if the six artifacts of Acalanatha are merged into one."

"The heart lamp may work." Kong Xuan sighed. "I'll have to look for it."

"It won't," the ghost king said. "It can exorcize demonic energy from a person who has descended into demonhood, true. But what's inside your

child is the demon seed of Mara, the catalyst that will gather all demonic energy in the mortal world—a fate that has belonged to you since the creation of the heavens and earth. The demon seed is an existence both demonic and divine, a destiny of creation and destruction both."

With a bang and a flash of white light, the ghost king withdrew his fingers from Hongjun's brow.

"It was real," Hongjun murmured, as if in a dream.

"Your father blamed himself," said the ghost king. "That choice he made in a moment was one he regretted for the rest of his life."

"Why?" Hongjun asked, his voice trembling. "*Why?*"

"Demons are born of the malign energies in the world. As time passes and beings reincarnate, demonic energies rise while others decline. When these energies become too abundant, the world finds a way to purify them. The demon seed within the Peacock Wisdom King Mahamayuri attracts such demonic energy. When he at last descends into demonhood, the Light-Bearer Dipamkara shines his heart lamp on the world, and Acalanatha merges his six artifacts into one to annihilate the heavenly demon Mara. Kong Xuan is then reincarnated once again, and this cycle continues without end."

The ghost king paused, then said sternly, "Now, little peacock. Answer my question again."

Hongjun looked back at him wordlessly.

"If you are destined to die, will you regret coming into this world and having lived at all?"

Hongjun rose, his eyes vacant.

"All mortal beings meet their end eventually," said the ghost king. "Now I believe you understand these words your adoptive father once said."

In a trance, Hongjun descended the stairs. He turned and stumbled down the walkway toward the entrance. His heart was a storm of lightning and thunder, howling winds and avalanches, yet he appeared eerily calm.

The last light of day slanted into the caves. The statues of deities and Buddhas watched him placidly as he passed. He was a solitary traveler in

the vastness of the world, both his origin and his destination unknown.

That evening, Li Jinglong left the pagoda at a brisk stride. A-Tai whistled down at him. “Where are you going?”

Li Jinglong didn’t answer. As the sun dipped low on the horizon, a group of soldiers appeared in the distance. When they reached Li Jinglong, they dismounted and bowed. “The general said he dared not leave his post, as it is vital to maintain the defense at Yumen Pass. He sent us with food and drink.”

“Thank you for making the journey,” Li Jinglong said. “Please deliver it inside.”

The soldiers moved the supplies into the building. Li Jinglong raised his head and called up to A-Tai, “It’s almost the new year. Let’s celebrate here—no need for any additional hassle.”

Only now did A-Tai remember that New Year’s Eve was just three days away. Ashina Adarvan said, “I didn’t expect to be here celebrating the new year of you Han people this year.”

“It’s too bad Yongsi isn’t here, or we’d have the whole gang,” Li Jinglong replied. “Mergen! Come downstairs and lend us a hand!”

Mergen was still sitting, thoughts adrift, on the third floor. Upon hearing his name, he looked down and sighed.

Li Jinglong sorted the supplies and rewarded the soldiers before nightfall. The group was eager to meet Hongjun, but recalling that he’d left with the ghost king earlier, Li Jinglong directed them to return home; they’d head over to Yumen Pass in a few days to speak to the general.

“Hongjun!” Li Jinglong ran up and down the stairs in search of him with no success; instead, he found Mergen standing stock-still in front of the cave where Lu Xu slumbered.

“Chief,” said Mergen. “Let’s have a chat. How are you still in the mood to celebrate the new year right now?”

“We’ll find a way to save him,” Li Jinglong said firmly.

“How?!”

Li Jinglong didn’t answer immediately. He stood beside Mergen, shoulder to shoulder as they faced the desert outside the Mogao Caves. The moon had risen, bathing the dunes in its snow-white light.

“What can I do to help?” Li Jinglong glanced inside the cave where Lu Xu slumbered beneath the murals. His voice was low. “Maybe you can teach me what to do, huh?”

“The gray wolf and white deer are fated to be together.”

“Right.” Li Jinglong slapped the guardrail in frustration. “You do it, then!”

On the floor below them, A-Tai stuck his head out and looked up at Li Jinglong. “Uh, sorry to butt in, but have either of you guys asked Hongjun what *he* wants?”

“What’s he supposed to ask?” the carp yao interjected. “You don’t need to ask him, Chief; the two of you are made for each other!”

“I don’t get it.” Ashina Adarvan shook his head. “Do you all see love as something that comes when you will it to? That’s not right! Are you really so confident, Li? Shall I teach you a few tricks?”

“That’s not what I said!” Li Jinglong retorted, bristling at his tone.

“Are you looking for a fight, you Göktürk bastard?” Mergen snapped.

Li Jinglong pointed to the far corner, gesturing to Mergen that they’d finish their conversation in private, then promptly pushed him over.

“Come on,” Mergen said. “What’s your plan? You always tell us to not worry, don’t you? And you always keep your promises.”

“You know how there are disguise techniques, right? Maybe we can ask the ghost king and other yaoguai if they know any techniques that can make you look like me, and me look like you…”

“What difference would that make?! Even if you disguise yourself as me before doing all that lovey-dovey stuff with him, isn’t the result the same?!”

Li Jinglong thought about it and concluded he had a point. “Or you can switch in at the last moment? I’ll stand on the side, and—”

“You might as well stand by the whole time and just shine your heart lamp on him at the end!”

“I’m just throwing out ideas!” Li Jinglong asked earnestly, “Can’t we give it a try?”

Mergen chose not to dignify that with a response. After a moment of thought, Li Jinglong changed tack. “Should we ask if it’s possible to remove our souls from our bodies? My soul can possess your body—”

“How is that any different from the first plan, Chief?”

“Listen,” Li Jinglong persisted, perfectly sincere. “You’d still be you. It’s just that my soul would *temporarily* be attached to your body.”

Mergen suddenly remembered: It was indeed possible to have two souls in one body. How would they achieve it, though? “Is the heart lamp in your soul or your meridians?”

Li Jinglong saw the problem instantly. “It’s in my meridians. No, this won’t work!”

Mergen was speechless.

On the floor below, Ashina Adarvan glanced up at them curiously before shrugging at A-Tai, who grinned and said, “Perhaps our chief was once the subject of a great many’s affections—that’s why he’s so confident in love now.”

Ashina Adarvan nudged A-Tai, jerking his chin toward a figure in the distance.

Under the moonlight, Hongjun was walking toward them, his steps dragging. He looked around and sighed, seemingly exhausted.

“Hongjun?” Ashina Adarvan called with a smile.

Hongjun didn’t answer. Instead he entered the grotto where Lu Xu lay in front of the murals, deep in slumber. He watched as the ghost king’s guards lit seven lamps and placed them on the floor near Lu Xu’s head, next to his shoulders, chest, waist, and hips.

“What spiritual technique is this?” Hongjun asked.

“These are the seven star lamps,” the guard replied. “They’ll bring solace to his soul, Your Highness.”

Hongjun nodded. He suddenly remembered both the plague god and the dark lady were still out there. They had no idea where the yao were hiding, or whether they'd attack again. But now the ghost king had awakened, and he feared neither pestilence nor snow. Hongjun guessed the two yao wouldn't be stupid enough to rile up the ghost king now that he was no longer trapped within his nightmares.

He sat down beside Lu Xu, leaning against one painted wall, and pressed a palm to Lu Xu's forehead.

His father had wanted to save his life but had somehow ended up saving Lu Xu's instead. Hongjun found himself wishing Lu Xu would wake up so he could return to those dreams, where he could see his parents and talk to them—even if only in his own memories.

Had Kong Xuan sincerely regretted the choice he'd made? Had his mother ever learned the truth of what happened?

Even if those events were long over and done with, Hongjun wanted, stubbornly, to know every detail. His past was clouded in fog, his future wholly uncertain. When would he take his father's place and become Mara? Where was the Immovable Wisdom King who would slaughter him?

The ghost king's words had sunk him into a thick haze. There seemed to be no meaning to his existence; his only value was as a sacrifice to something larger than himself.

"Lu Xu," Hongjun whispered. "My dad was a good man, wasn't he?"

Lu Xu lay quietly, asleep.

Hongjun smiled bitterly. "He saved your life but left me with the cruelest fate."

He tilted his head and looked at Lu Xu. He didn't know who to talk to about this, but he was sure Lu Xu had seen everything when he thrust Hongjun into that nightmare, including his past and his origins. As he watched, Lu Xu's lashes fluttered. Frowning, Hongjun leaned in for a closer look.

Lu Xu opened his eyes and answered him: "Your fate is far crueler than what you've seen."

As Hongjun stared at him in shock, Lu Xu grabbed his arm and yanked.

“Let go!” Hongjun yelled.

A whirlwind of pitch-black energy swirled to life, enveloping the two of them in an instant. Hongjun shoved Lu Xu away. “I cut off your antlers! You shouldn’t have any spiritual power!”

Lu Xu sneered, his voice a hoarse rasp. “I still have my soul.”

The dark energy surrounding them roared faster, curling toward Hongjun from within Lu Xu’s body. Hongjun felt a sharp pain in his heart and looked down to see those tendrils of energy diving into his chest. The dark whirlwind exploded outward, sweeping through the grotto.

At that moment, Li Jinglong and Mergen’s argument had devolved into a fistfight. “Mergen!” Li Jinglong shouted, seizing his collar.

Abruptly, Mergen released his grip on him; both of them turned toward the grotto that held Lu Xu. The sight of the dark energy shooting into the sky made everyone—the ghost king, his guards, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan—freeze in surprise.

Ashina Adarvan was first to recover. “Hongjun’s in there!”

The whirlwind of black energy funneled out of the grotto, accompanied by a throat-rending scream.

Li Jinglong and Mergen took off toward the grotto at a sprint as the dark energy contracted around the entrance.

“Lu Xu!” Mergen howled.

“Hongjun!” Li Jinglong cried.

Inside the cave, Lu Xu and Hongjun lay sprawled on the ground side by side. The dark energy flooded back into the grotto and flowed into the walls. The mural absorbed it in an instant, and the black fog vanished in a flash of light, leaving both Li Jinglong and Mergen speechless.

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Chapter 66:
The Jataka of the Deer King

HONGJUN'S HEAD throbbed with a pain so intense he felt he'd taken a sledgehammer to the head. As he came back to his senses, he found himself in a dark forest, completely naked. He reached for his knives and pentacolor sacred light. They were gone.

"Where am I?" Hongjun asked. "Chief! Ghost King! Mer—"

"Hush." It was the gentle voice of a young man. "Don't speak, lest you be spotted."

"Who's there?" Hongjun looked around, but he seemed to be alone.

"Walk toward the light and you'll find me," said the voice. "I'll try to get you out of here."

Hongjun turned until he spied a glimmer of light in the innermost depths of the forest. But was this voice a friend or foe?

"Trust me," said the voice.

Hongjun's neck prickled with fright. He remained still. The voice spoke again: "I can sense your fear, but you needn't worry. As long as you are human, you are vulnerable to being deceived by your dreams. Even what you see with your own eyes may not be real—and in dreams, even more so."

Soothed by these words, Hongjun crept toward the light, which shone brighter for a moment before dimming again. He trudged through the woods naked, the fallen leaves crackling under his bare feet. Hongjun's heart thudded; he desperately wanted to stop and look for some leaves that could cover his body.

The light pulsed again, bright and then dim. At last Hongjun reached the innermost depths of the forest, where the trees parted to reveal a raised stone pool, the water in it shimmering with a faint glow. Before the pool stood a young man, similarly naked. He was lean and muscular, and almost as tall as Hongjun. The moonlight and the glistening pool cast their silvery

glow upon him. Spotting Hongjun, the young man smiled with a lift of his brows—it was Lu Xu.

“Lu… Lu…” Met with the sight of that near perfect body, Hongjun almost got a nosebleed on the spot.

Lu Xu was also abashed. He turned his face aside before saying, “We meet again, Gege.”

Hongjun was stunned silent.

Lu Xu raised a hand; a flash of light swept over their bodies and solidified into two pairs of white trousers, leaving their torsos bare.

“Ah. This is much better,” Hongjun said awkwardly.

“Do you want a shirt too?” Lu Xu asked. “I know you don’t usually wear them at Yaojin Palace.”

Hongjun waved Lu Xu’s concerns aside—he was fine like this. Avian yao prized their wings; as Lu Xu said, they felt uncomfortable with their backs covered, even though their upper garments disappeared when they shifted into bird form.

“What is this place?” Hongjun furrowed his brow as he studied Lu Xu. “Have you recovered?”

Lu Xu sighed. “We’re inside a mural—*The Jataka of the Deer King*.”

Hongjun’s confused expression was replaced with a conflicted one. Lu Xu eyed him before picking up a small wooden cup from the edge of the pool. He scooped up some water and passed it to Hongjun. Realizing he was parched, Hongjun drank the whole cup. He drank again each time the cup was refilled, until he’d downed several cups of the water.

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“There’s a heart demon somewhere in the forest, not far from here,” Lu Xu said. “My soul and the heart demon separate when I return to this mural.”

“Can you leave this place with me?”

Lu Xu shook his head. “Whenever I leave the mural, the heart demon and I merge into one. Before, when I had no body, I could only move around as a soul. But now that I’ve found the body with my one remaining immortal soul and mortal form, the heart demon will take control of me as soon as it escapes its shackles. Fortunately you and the gray wolf severed my antlers, Gege.”

Somehow, out of the entire explanation, Hongjun only seemed to register the last word. “You’re older than me,” he said, chuckling. “Stop calling me that, it’s weird.”

Lu Xu leapt up onto the edge of the raised pool, jerking his chin toward the water.

Hongjun peered in and fell instantly silent. The image within the pool was of a starry night. Kong Xuan carried a child on his shoulders as he knocked on the door of a house in a Shiwei village at the foot of the Qilian Mountains—the same house Mergen had once seen ravaged by corpse ghosts.

The Shiwei couple residing there had just welcomed a baby boy. Kong Xuan set down the child on his shoulders and scooped the baby into his arms, stroking the infant’s chest and back.

“This is—”

Lu Xu looked at Hongjun with an apologetic smile. “You are the older child. I’m the baby.”

The infant was freshly bathed and swaddled. Lu Xu’s father cradled him as the two men talked on the bamboo couch, while Kong Xuan held Hongjun’s small hand.

The water rippled, and the image disappeared.

“Hongjun,” Lu Xu said with a smile. “After such a long wait, you’re finally here.”

He jumped down from the edge of the stone pool and threw himself at Hongjun, who yelped as he was knocked to the ground.

“Huh,” Hongjun said as Lu Xu’s arms closed around him in a hug. “So that’s why you only remembered my name!”

Hongjun pulled Lu Xu up, and the two of them sat on the ground with their backs to the wall around the pool. Lu Xu’s expression turned gloomy. “I only had one immortal soul and one mortal form. I thought you resembled him.”

“My father.”

“Mm.” Lu Xu nodded.

“A couple days ago, I dreamed of him and my mother.”

Lu Xu tilted his head to look at Hongjun. “Those dreams aren’t real. Or rather, not all of them are real.”

Hongjun grabbed Lu Xu’s arm. “Can you make me see them clearly in my dreams again? I dreamed of the chief, and Di Renjie—”

Lu Xu shrugged, palms up, and said gravely, “You cut my antlers off.”

Hongjun slapped a hand to his forehead in despair.

“Someone sealed your memories when you were a child,” Lu Xu said. “Did you know that?”

“What?!”

Before Lu Xu could elaborate, the sky went dark, and they heard a rumble like the roll of thunder from afar. Lu Xu pressed his palms to the pool’s surface and gestured for Hongjun to keep quiet.

Hongjun watched the edge of the trees warily. The sky was a pale yellow, like the paint of the murals. A cloud of black fog was spreading insistently toward them from the southwest.

“It’s looking for you,” Lu Xu murmured. “After my immortal souls and mortal forms returned to my body, the heart demon wrapped itself around you and me and brought us into the mural. I managed to call your soul into this forest with a spiritual technique. But you must have demonic

energy in your body too—how could it bring you into the mural otherwise?”

“I do,” Hongjun confirmed.

“But your demonic energy didn’t separate from your soul after entering the mural.” Lu Xu frowned. “Can I take a look?”

He stretched out a hand toward Hongjun, his fingers glowing with white light as they sank into Hongjun’s chest. The sensation of Lu Xu’s fingers brushing his heart made his body tremble from head to toe. Lu Xu withdrew his hand after only a moment.

“It’s a…a…” Lu Xu hesitated.

“A demon seed,” whispered Hongjun. Their eyes met. “I only just found out myself.”

“So you’re Mara’s vessel?” Lu Xu studied Hongjun carefully. “But why haven’t you absorbed much—”

“Don’t ask,” Hongjun said helplessly. “I hardly know anything.”

Watching Hongjun, Lu Xu seemed to come to some resolution. He nodded. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

Hongjun smiled bitterly, feeling a wash of inexplicable sadness.

“They must be searching for you back in the Mogao Caves,” Lu Xu said. “The heart demon will try to make a deal with them. It’ll want to exchange you—its hostage within this mural—for something else. As long as it leaves the mural to do it, I’ll have a chance to send you out. Come with me.”

Hongjun had many more questions to ask, but Lu Xu patted him on the back and pulled him to his feet. “There’s a narrow trail just there—let’s go!”

The verdant shadows of the trees danced under the sunlight. Walking through the sun-dappled forest after such a long time in the snowy lands of the north made Hongjun long for summer in Chang’an.

“Your home is so pretty. How long have you been here?” Hongjun was struck by the sudden thought that staying in this mural wouldn’t be so bad. Life was simple, and the scenery was beautiful in this secluded place.

“I don’t know.” Lu Xu looked back at him uncertainly. “I’ve been living in this mural for as long as I can remember.”

When Lu Xu’s reincarnation was interrupted, he’d lost all the memories he had as the white deer. Perhaps due to the abundant spiritual energy flowing during his birth, the strongest memory he had was of Kong Xuan and his young son. Everything else was a blur. He knew only that he lived in this mural, asleep sometimes, awake at others. When awake, he spent his time in the forest of the mural; when asleep, he saw the mortal world through Lu Xu’s eyes.

Surprised, Hongjun exclaimed, “So that means that you—”

“Yes.” Lu Xu nodded. “I saw you and the gray wolf, and I tried to lead you to the Mogao Caves.”

Hongjun took a deep breath. Expression darkening, Lu Xu continued. “The plague god and the dark lady entered this mural with a black dragon they called the yao king.”

They emerged from the forest and looked out into the distance, where a palace stood. “That was where I lived during my childhood,” Lu Xu said. “I was driven out when they occupied the palace.”

Hongjun hadn’t expected Lu Xu to have it even worse than himself—he’d lived alone in this mural his whole life. He wrapped his arm around Lu Xu’s shoulder and pulled him close. “Did you really live alone here for eighteen years?”

Lu Xu nodded. “I’d occasionally catch glimpses of the outside world. I saw how my parents cared for the other part of me out there. Then they passed away too.”

Hongjun’s eyes stung. He looked up at Lu Xu, and their gazes met. Lu Xu continued, “While I was confined here, I wondered often if you all would ever find me. I couldn’t always control my body outside—they were searching relentlessly for it. I thought of going to you, but I didn’t dare draw their attention. And I had to be ready to return to the mural at any time, or they’d notice I was gone.”

Shocked, Hongjun said, “So the day you ran away, you…”

In a last-ditch attempt, Lu Xu had taken control of his body in the mortal world and attempted to lead Hongjun to the Mogao Caves. But that night, the plague god and the dark lady had rushed over to drag the white deer out of the mural. It was by chance that they noticed some irregularities that led them to Lu Xu's physical body.

Lu Xu nodded gloomily. "As soon as I exited the mural, the heart demon took control, and I ended up invading your dream."

They had arrived at the doors of the palace. Hongjun asked, "How did this heart demon come to be?"

Outside the mural, chaos had erupted in the grotto.

The carp yao threw himself over Hongjun and cried out his name again and again. Mergen felt for Lu Xu's pulse, and Li Jinglong tilted his head to listen for Hongjun's breathing, the two of them still quarreling loudly.

"Quiet!" the ghost king roared.

"What happened?" A-Tai asked.

"They're still breathing, and their pulses are stable," Mergen said anxiously. "Are they dreaming?"

"Their souls have left their bodies," answered the ghost king. "What was the last thing you saw?"

Li Jinglong described how the dark energy had flooded the grotto, then been absorbed by the mural. As everyone looked up at the images depicting the life of the nine-colored deer, the ghost king pronounced, "They have entered the mural."

"Hongjun's spiritual devices are still on his body here," said Ashina Adarvan. "He's only a soul—he's going to be in big trouble."

Li Jinglong studied the mural, which was surrounded by a faint haze of dark energy.

"Do not panic," the ghost king said. "I can pull your souls from your bodies so you can enter the mural and save him."

Mergen had a sudden thought. “If their souls are in the mural, that means the white deer’s demonic energy is also—”

“You can give it a try,” answered the ghost king. “But it’s too early to celebrate.”

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Chapter 67:
Myriad Nightmares

HONGJUN AND LU XU stood outside the garden of a once-magnificent palace in the middle of a wilderness. The mural, titled *The Jataka of the Deer King*, told the story of a hunter's chance encounter with the nine-colored deer in the forest. The hunter reported the incident to his king and set off on an expedition to slay the regal deer, the protector of all living things.

But now, the colorful mural was crawling with black energy.

Lu Xu turned to Hongjun. "There's an array in the middle of the palace; it's what the dark lady and the plague god use to enter the mural—it must be a way out as well."

Hongjun suddenly recalled the array the fox yao had used to transport them to the blood sea. He drew a few sigils on the ground from memory. "Does it look like this?"

"You've seen it?" Lu Xu asked in surprise.

Perhaps they were not in the actual mural at all, but rather an akasha realm created by the dark lady and the plague god.

A pair of meteors streaked across the sky and plunged into the trees behind them. Hongjun stared in confusion as Lu Xu whipped his head around. "Someone's entered the mural!"

In the forest, a buck-naked Li Jinglong and Mergen stared at each other before glancing at their surroundings. Hongjun gave a great shout as he dashed over with Lu Xu.

Li Jinglong rushed forward and grabbed Hongjun's arm. "What are you guys doing?!"

"Lu Xu?! You're awake?" Mergen hurried up as well. Lu Xu took a half step back, hiding behind Hongjun.

Brow locked in a deep frown, Li Jinglong asked, "Hongjun, what's gotten into you these past few days?"

Hongjun pressed his lips together in silence. Lu Xu had seen Hongjun's dreams; he guessed the source of his hesitation and offered, "Why don't you guys…put on some clothes first?"

Li Jinglong blinked; he did have a point.

Lu Xu snapped his fingers. White light unfurled from his hand, transforming into a pair of pants for Li Jinglong. Mergen shifted into wolf form and shook out his fur. "I'm fine," he said in a low rumble. "Lu Xu, is this your dream?"

"I don't know," Lu Xu responded.

"What happened?" the gray wolf asked again.

Mergen and Li Jinglong's arrival seemed to make Lu Xu suddenly guarded and reluctant to speak. Hongjun glanced at him, then roughly recounted what had happened since he entered the mural.

Li Jinglong stared intently at Hongjun, his eyes seeming to bore straight into his heart. Discomfited, Hongjun looked away.

"So this is an akasha realm within the mural," Li Jinglong said after a moment of thoughtful silence.

Even preoccupied as he was with the past, Hongjun had to admit the sight of Li Jinglong was reassuring. With Li Jinglong here, they would be able to solve anything.

"You think this place is built on the same principles as the realm the nine-tailed fox created in that cave?" the gray wolf asked.

"Perhaps," Li Jinglong said. "But it must be more complicated than that."

Li Jinglong and Mergen turned to Lu Xu once more. "Lu Xu," Li Jinglong began, grim, "you have to give us a proper explanation. Otherwise, we've nothing to go on here."

Lu Xu frowned. "I really don't know."

What knowledge he had of this place was disjointed—after all, he'd been living inside the mural since birth. He could only sense his body in the human realm on rare occasions; he couldn't even read. Faced with their questions, he strained to remember as much as he could.

Long ago, when the Buddhist monk Lezun had dug out the first of the Mogao Caves, he'd carved a number of scriptures into the walls using a secret technique. These scriptures—which imparted lessons such as, *Three thousand worlds, three thousand prajna bodhi,* and *Mount Sumeru contained within a mustard seed*—carried supreme magical power. These carvings had been worn away with the passage of time and flattened by the chisels of innumerable artisans after him, but miraculously, their power remained.

These scripture-carved walls imbued the murals painted on them with unique spiritual attributes; for instance, some had the power to create akasha realms. After Lezun passed, the white deer came from the west and selected a grotto to house its soul. Later, a painter saw the mysterious stone carvings, picked up his brush, and painted *The Jataka of the Deer King* on the wall.

"And—what is this heart demon?" Li Jinglong voiced the question that most concerned everyone.

"I think it's the embodiment of my malign energy—or perhaps I should say the malign energy of my previous incarnation." Lu Xu could no longer remember anything prior to his reincarnation. His memories began at the moment of his rebirth, and the scattered pieces of information he possessed had been gleaned from what he'd overheard of the dark lady and the plague god's conversations.

"It's probably not your malign energy," the gray wolf said as he studied Lu Xu. "It's the nightmares you absorbed over the course of millennia."

"Perhaps you're right," Lu Xu said. "I don't remember my previous life, but in any case, those two yaoguai turned those nightmares into something new."

Struck by a thought, Hongjun asked, "Have you seen the yao king?"

Lu Xu considered this. "There was a black snake that appeared sometimes in front of the altar. They called him 'Your Majesty.'"

As Li Jinglong looked around the palace, the gray wolf observed, "There's a protective barrier outside."

“The heart demon’s not here,” Lu Xu said. “It probably went out to look for Hongjun and me.”

“Let’s go in and take a look,” Li Jinglong said. “Hongjun has no spiritual power right now, so you two stay behind us.”

The gray wolf cleared a path through the underbrush and leapt into the garden, and Li Jinglong strode in after him.

“You don’t have any either,” Hongjun grumbled as he followed him in.

At once, the black energy surrounding the palace sensed their intrusion and rushed toward them with a roar. Its dark tendrils whipped outward like flying snakes, raging in all directions. Li Jinglong raised a hand, unleashing the power of the heart lamp. The tendrils let out a terrifying howl and exploded in the light of the white flames.

Hongjun was stunned. “You…”

Li Jinglong looked down at his right hand then glanced back up at Hongjun. “Looks like the heart lamp has already fused with my soul.”

No wonder I couldn’t find the heart lamp when I poured my sacred light into his meridians, Hongjun thought.

Before Hongjun could recover from his shock, Li Jinglong was shouting, “Let’s go!”

Summoning the bright glare of the heart lamp, he strode briskly into the palace. Only the manifestation of their souls had entered the mural; Hongjun—who excelled at using spiritual devices—was now the weakest of the group. Mergen could transform into the gray wolf, while Li Jinglong could use the heart lamp, and so these two led the way, protecting Hongjun and Lu Xu behind them.

More dark tendrils whipped toward them, only to writhe and disperse under the heart lamp’s bright rays. Li Jinglong raised his hand to shine the light in all directions, clearing their path as they made their way deeper into the palace. Thousands more snakelike coils rushed toward them from the ceiling, surging through the palace doors in a frenzy of dark energy. A bright explosion of light drove the darkness back.

“Bar the doors!” Lu Xu shouted.

Hongjun and Mergen shoved the palace doors closed. Backs against the heavy barrier, they spotted an altar standing in the middle of the main hall, above which floated a dark sphere emitting streams of black energy that twisted outward in all directions.

“This is your heart demon?” Li Jinglong asked.

Lu Xu stared at the black sphere, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“Yes or no!” Li Jinglong snapped.

“Maybe—yes,” Lu Xu promptly responded. “I haven’t seen it in a very long time. How has it grown so fast?!”

“Destroy it!” the gray wolf howled. “It’s the only way to purify Lu Xu’s soul!”

Li Jinglong had realized it too—whenever Lu Xu left the mural, he was consumed by the heart demon and became the black deer; it was only inside the mural that the heart demon separated from his soul. This was their best opportunity to exorcise it!

He threw out a hand, and the light in his palm stretched and expanded into a great white bow. A dazzling arrow appeared, already nocked to the string.

As if sensing the danger, the black sphere shuddered. A clap of thunder rumbled across the sky as the heart demon, still searching for Hongjun, turned its attention to this new threat. A mass of black energy burst through the palace windows on all sides. Li Jinglong drew his bow, the muscles of his bare shoulders and back straining to the limit, and shouted, “Fly!”

The arrow burst from the string. Demonic energy hurtled toward the black sphere, intercepting the arrow with a deafening *bang*; a shockwave rippled outward as the darkness crashed into the heart lamp’s glow.

Li Jinglong stared in shock.

In the past, whether he was fighting the nine-tailed celestial fox, the fallen-corpse-ghost king, or any of the countless other monsters they’d encountered, those who possessed demonic energy had either retreated or been purged in the light of the heart lamp. How could this heart demon resist its glow? It roared and spewed black energy that licked through the

air like flames. For every shadowy tendril the heart lamp burned up, more darkness surged forth, swallowing the palace with them inside.

“Look out!” the gray wolf shouted.

Hongjun tackled Lu Xu to the ground and rolled as Li Jinglong transformed the heart lamp into a gleaming sword and charged forward.

“You’re trying to exorcize me when you can’t even manifest Dipamkara?” the heart demon sneered. “You’re no more than a moth flying into a flame—you’ll get burned by such arrogance!”

Hovering above the altar, the black sphere contracted, then released tens of thousands of dark missiles—each one a nightmare. They hurtled like meteors in all directions, chasing the four mortals across the hall.

Hongjun kept hold of Lu Xu. No matter how much he wanted to join the fight, he had no power to do so. He could only dodge attack after attack, dragging Lu Xu behind him. “Lu Xu!” he shouted. “What do we do?!”

“Get to the altar!” Lu Xu shouted back. “The array is there! I can activate the array!”

The palace ceiling was collapsing, bit by bit, from the impact of the black energy. The gray wolf bounded over and knocked Hongjun and Lu Xu aside as a beam crashed down. “Get out of here!” he howled.

Twisting through the air before the altar, the heart demon absorbed the last wisps of black energy. It spewed dark mist at Li Jinglong as he struggled to fend it off with his sword.

“Go!” he yelled at the others.

“Mergen! Cover us!” Hongjun shouted.

The gray wolf’s pupils contracted in shock, but Hongjun was already dashing toward the altar in the center of the hall, pulling Lu Xu along. The roiling black energy surged outward, colliding with the gray wolf. He flipped in midair as the black energy wrapped around him, transforming into a charging army of halberd-wielding soldiers. The wolf threw his head back in an earsplitting howl, and the nightmare soldiers scattered.

Hongjun darted past and neared the altar. He was five steps away when the heart demon shrieked. Spinning rapidly, it split itself in two and

sent half, in the form of Liu Fei, slashing toward Hongjun with his dark sword.

Hongjun jumped in front of Lu Xu and raised an arm, blocking the shadowy Liu Fei's first strike.

"Hongjun!" Lu Xu cried.

"Don't worry about me!" Hongjun shouted, shoving Lu Xu toward the altar.

The specter of Liu Fei, conjured from that mass of fiendish energy, roared as it swung for Hongjun's head. But Hongjun's reaction to being struck by the demonic energy was unlike Mergen's and Li Jinglong's. As the blow landed, an answering flash of black energy flared in Hongjun's chest, drawing Liu Fei's nightmare into his own body.

For a brief moment amid the clamor, Hongjun caught a glimpse of Liu Fei's dream, just as he had the night he arrived in Liang Prefecture.

A handsome young general stood in a sunlit courtyard, watching as a beautiful woman made her way toward him through an open-air corridor. They met on a summer night and kissed beneath the starry sky. They quarreled fiercely, and the girl turned her face away and left.

"Nao…" Liu Fei held tight to the girl's hand as he lay on his sickbed.

The beautiful woman—Lady Nao—choked out a sob as her lovely eyes reddened at the rims. "I shall pass on with Your Majesty…"

Liu Fei closed his eyes in peace, but the nightmare continued. Hongjun saw Liu Fei laid to rest in the royal tombs, while Lady Nao walked to a young man's bed and slowly untied her mourning robes.

A surge of hatred burst like a clap of thunder in Hongjun's heart. Liu Fei's own son, Liu Jian, slept with his father's lover before hanging himself; Lady Nao fled in terror, only to be embraced by her own brother… The lurid images paraded before him until the ghost king pressed his hand to Liu Fei's brow.

"The past is ephemeral as a cloud. Pledge allegiance to me, and you will walk beyond the twin paths of life and death…"

"*Hongjun!*" Li Jinglong shouted furiously.

Hongjun startled awake amid a burst of blinding light and the rumble of a lupine snarl.

Lu Xu tore toward the altar, his head bowed as he examined the array. The heart demon had abandoned its fight with the others and turned all its focus on Hongjun. A pair of bloodred eyes appeared within the humanoid shadow.

“You absorbed the nightmare?!” the heart demon raged, its voice a low hiss. “Demon seed!”

Hongjun stumbled half a step backward and stared down at the black energy swirling over his chest. Black mist curled up from his heart; Liu Fei’s pain had already fused into his soul. The grief of losing his lover and the pain of what Liu Fei had seen after cut Hongjun to the core, the deepest and most fundamental agony in the world.

With a roar, the heart demon shot another barrage of demonic energy through the room like a black meteor shower. Li Jinglong lunged forward to shield Hongjun behind him—but to his surprise, Hongjun pressed a hand to his shoulder and shoved him aside, fearlessly charging forward to meet the heart demon’s attack.

Jets of demonic energy rushed toward Hongjun in an endless series of explosions, disappearing into his body one after another. In the space of a heartbeat, Hongjun was drowning in despair and anger—*a father cooking and eating his son; a cavalryman killing his comrades; a scout leaping off of a cliff; murder, betrayal, hunger, humiliation.*

“No!” Li Jinglong shouted.

Lu Xu and Mergen stared in shock as infernal energy writhed around Hongjun. His expression twisted savagely as his eyes closed, then flew open once more. “Return!”

Hongjun threw out his hands, and the countless nightmares screaming through the palace paused in their flight and shot toward him, gathering in his palms to form a sharp blade. He slashed toward the heart demon.

The heart demon hissed in fury, “Demon see—”

Its voice died on the edge of Hongjun’s blade. The world seemed to tremble; pillars crumbled and the palace collapsed, walls shearing away to

reveal the hazy sky and earth. Hongjun and the heart demon rose up over the ruins as the pain and sorrow of all the world's nightmares, accumulated over the course of a millennium, funneled into a swirling vortex with Hongjun and the heart demon at its dark center.

Hongjun's eyes glowed red as bloody demonic markings crawled over his naked torso. The heart demon shifted into the black-clad Lu Xu's form and began to frantically absorb the nightmares whipping around them, as if afraid Hongjun would draw them all away.

"Foolish demon," Hongjun said slowly, his voice going deep and hoarse. "These mortal sufferings should have long been buried in darkness. How have they become your playthings?"

Caught off guard by this development, Li Jinglong shouted, "Lu Xu, hurry! We can't let this go on! Get us out of here!"

Lu Xu spread his hands over the array, white light streaming from his palms into the center of the altar.

Outside the mural, the ghost king, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan stared at *The Jataka of the Deer King* in silence. The mural had undergone a terrifying transformation, its original colors now completely distorted. A pair of half-naked youths, wreathed in black energy, had appeared within the mural; beneath them, a wolf and a man glowing with white light appeared to be engaging in battle.

"They're about to emerge," the ghost king said grimly.

Ashina Adarvan cast a glance at the four young men lying side by side on the ground. The carp yao was wiping the sweat from Hongjun's brow with a piece of cloth.

Inside the mural, the array began to spin as Lu Xu poured more and more energy into the lines and sigils.

As one, Hongjun and the heart demon turned to look at Lu Xu. With a terrible roar, the heart demon broke away from Hongjun and lunged for Lu Xu, Hongjun streaking after it. Lu Xu rose into the air, floating above the array, as Li Jinglong and the gray wolf rushed to his side.

Lu Xu looked up and met Hongjun's eyes. "After you get out," he said quietly, "kill me. There is nothing to fear from death. Don't lose yourself, Gege."

"Lu Xu!" Hongjun cried as the heart demon slammed into him. Lu Xu opened his arms and seized his mirror image, still emanating black energy. The heart demon began to sink into Lu Xu's chest as the two melded. Hongjun screamed, throat raw: "No! *Lu Xu!*"

The gray wolf howled, a violent wave of sound that knocked the heart demon loose from Lu Xu's body. Hongjun's hand shot out, plunging into Lu Xu's chest and grabbing the shadowy figure by the hair. An earth-shattering wave of black energy erupted from his hand as he tore the heart demon out of Lu Xu.

Lu Xu jerked in surprise as the array collapsed into a ring of light that spread rapidly outward.

Within the cave, a dazzling beam of light burst from *The Jataka of the Deer King*, expelling the shadowy specters of four souls alongside a writhing mass of black energy.

The ghost king spun the rattle drum in his hands. "Wake up, all of you!"

Li Jinglong's, Lu Xu's, and Mergen's eyes flew open. Only Hongjun's soul reentered his body with the roiling black energy in tow.

"Hongjun!" the carp yao cried in horror, jumping aside.

Li Jinglong was on his feet in an instant, summoning the heart lamp to dispel the black energy. But it was too late—the mass of darkness had already been completely absorbed into Hongjun's heart. He opened his eyes, his face a mask of hatred.

In the next breath, the mural spat out the ferocious heart demon. A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan struck simultaneously, but the heart demon slipped past, hurtling out of the Mogao Caves wreathed in fiendish mist.

"After it!" Mergen shouted.

Everyone jumped to their feet and dashed out of the grotto.

The heart demon shot out from the third floor under the dim glow of the late-night stars as the gray wolf arrived with a snarl, treading across the

starlight as he crashed into the heart demon and sent the creature flying. A-Tai dashed out as well, bracing a hand against the railing before whipping his cyclone fan open to shoot a jet of raging flame.

The ghost king leapt the railing with a cadre of his personal guards, flying from the Mogao Caves with Lu Xu close behind.

“Dissolve his nightmares!” Lu Xu called out.

“Where’s the chief?!” A-Tai hollered back.

Hongjun drew his throwing knives and was about to charge out of the cave after them when a hand clamped around his wrist and dragged him back.

“Listen to me,” Li Jinglong said. “You can’t absorb the heart demon’s nightmares—”

Hongjun punched him in the face. The blow landed cleanly at the outer corner of Li Jinglong’s eye, setting his head spinning so fast he reeled and nearly fell over.

“You guys were all working together to lie to me.” Hongjun clenched his fists, shaking with anger. “You knew it was the demon seed all this time.”

Li Jinglong coughed and pressed a hand over his eye. “It was my fault; I lied to you. But no matter what happens, you can’t—you can’t absorb any more demonic energy… Hongjun, promise me—*promise me*…”

He raised his head with difficulty, seeing double as the fury on Hongjun’s face slowly gave way to flat indifference. “Just say yes,” Li Jinglong pleaded. “I promise I’ll defeat it, but you can’t ever do what you did in the mural again. Nod your head. Nod your head, or I won’t let you go!”

Hongjun huffed out a sharp breath and nodded, once, before rushing out of the Mogao Caves after the heart demon.

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Chapter 68:
The Swift and Vigorous Brush

THE HEART DEMON was surrounded high in the air outside the nine-storied pagoda, its body like dark embers of a firework descending to earth. These were the nightmares the white deer had gathered from innumerable people over the course of millennia, transformed into endless ghostly shadows that filled the sky with pain, sorrow, and despair.

“He released all the nightmares!” Lu Xu shouted.

“You’re the white deer! Can’t you control them?!” A-Tai shouted back.

Lu Xu gritted his teeth and shifted into the white deer, bounding across the sky. But his antlers, which had once glowed with white light, had been shorn. They could no longer absorb the nightmares raging across the earth and sky. Tens of thousands of ghostly figures roiled on the ground below, swarming the ghost king and his personal guards.

“Attack!” the ghost king bellowed.

Metal rasped as his guards drew their long-handled dagger-axes. Their weapons glowed with a purple luster as they imbued them with energy from their cores and swung at the nightmares that lunged toward them, dispelling shadows with each slash of their blades.

Seeing the gray wolf and the white deer in the air, A-Tai snapped the cyclone fan closed. He and Ashina Adarvan each formed a hand seal. A fiery aspect of Ahura Mazda, chief Zoroastrian god, manifested behind A-Tai, while the manifestation of Verethragna, the god of war, rose up behind Ashina Adarvan. Together they gave chase, harrying the nightmares rampaging across the sky.

Hongjun leapt down from the third floor and landed on the ground. His throwing knives were useless against these nightmares. He unleashed the pentacolor sacred light, but it likewise had no effect.

“Hongjun!” the gray wolf shouted. “Get out of the way!”

He took a few steps back, furious beyond words, but he had no choice but to retreat back into the caves.

Standing atop the highest floor of the pagoda, Li Jinglong drew his bow, the arrow flashing with white light as he nervously watched the heart demon discharge wave after infinite wave of nightmares from its body.

“Chief, shoot!” the gray wolf shouted.

Li Jinglong’s arrow flew from the string, slicing across the night sky toward the heart demon. The instant the arrowhead pierced it, the heart demon exploded with a thunderous *bang* and seemed to diminish. Yet almost immediately, another wave of nightmares poured into the sky.

“Hongjun! Hurry up and get over here!” the carp yao yelled.

Helpless, Hongjun stood on the third floor and grappled with a hundred conflicting emotions as he watched his comrades fight the heart demon without him.

The tide of the aerial battle had turned against the gray wolf and the white deer. “Go back!” the gray wolf called.

The white deer didn’t argue; springing through the air, he landed beside Hongjun at the guardrail and transformed back into Lu Xu.

Hongjun gasped harshly and squeezed his eyes shut, his heart groaning under the weight of countless sorrows. The vision of Liu Fei’s past and the night terrors of strangers all across the Divine Land clawed at his soul, dragging him down into a boundless darkness.

“Do all common people suffer like this?” Hongjun asked in a trembling voice.

Lu Xu pressed a hand to Hongjun’s back, passing what little spiritual power he had left into Hongjun’s body to help break him free of the nightmares.

“Whenever I merged with the heart demon,” Lu Xu admitted quietly, “I felt their pain so viscerally I thought I would die. Hoping for your return became my only solace amid the pain. That was all that kept me going.”

But what should I hope for? Hongjun wondered as he gazed into the night sky.

The nightmares seethed and raged at the entrance of the Mogao Caves. The Sword of Wisdom in hand, Li Jinglong charged onto the battlefield, hacking in all directions with the power of the heart lamp.

“Hongjun isn’t here, is he?!” Li Jinglong shouted.

“He’s up above!” the ghost king called back. “We’re far outnumbered—we can’t kill them all! You have to slay the heart demon!”

“I can’t fight much longer!” Li Jinglong responded.

He had called on the heart lamp too many times; his chest spasmed with pain. Mergen was engaging the heart demon in wolf form high above.

“There are too many of them!” Ashina Adarvan shouted from the air. “Don’t you have a plan?! We can’t hold them off for much longer!”

This was their first time fighting a true demon, and they found themselves completely unprepared. The demon had no fear of spiritual techniques that summoned fire, wind, or lightning, let alone common swords or knives. They could only defend against the demonic energy through sheer force of will, by mustering all the spiritual power within their bodies. Using spiritual power like this consumed too much energy. It was impossible to sustain the effort long enough to eliminate all the nightmares. To make matters worse, even if they managed to dispel the nightmares before them, the heart demon might release another wave at any moment.

“The only way to get rid of the heart demon is to absorb them all,” Hongjun said.

“No!” Lu Xu objected. “You mustn’t!”

“Hongjun! Look!” the carp yao called out. “A dragon! A dragon’s come!”

Everyone looked up as a glittering silver jiao snaked across the night sky, mirroring the dazzling river of stars above.

“Not a dragon—a jiao,” Hongjun corrected. “Who is that?!”

“Hai mie hou bi!” Qiu Yongsi’s voice rang out from the head of the jiao. In the next moment, the scholarly young man leapt down from on high, cloak billowing around him. “My dear comrades… What the hell is all this?!”

“Qiu Yongsi!”

“Yongsi!”

Seeing that reinforcements had arrived, everyone shouted in unison, “Hurry up and help!”

After depositing Qiu Yongsi, the jiao rose back into the air, disappearing toward the horizon. Gripping his brush, Qiu Yongsi looked left and right. Spotting the ghost king, he screamed in fright, “Monster!”

“Not him!” Li Jinglong shouted. “The shadows! Attack the shadows!”

Qiu Yongsi stumbled backward. “How are there so many of them?! What *are* these things?!”

“He’s a member of your Department of Exorcism?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

A-Tai couldn’t summon a response.

“Qiu Yongsi!” the carp yao hollered from his perch in the Mogao Caves. “Pull yourself together! I’m your boss, remember?!”

Qiu Yongsi glanced up, then looked back down at the battlefield. Gathering his courage, he decided to go all in. He jogged back a few steps, then flipped his sleeves back, leapt into the air, and shook open his cloak, lifting the riverscape brush high. “Buy me some time!”

Wielding his brush with swift and vigorous strokes, Qiu Yongsi began to recite an incantation. The Mogao Caves’ numerous grottoes flared with light, glowing brightly against the dark. With a deep thrum, all of the apsaras, bodhisattvas, wisdom kings, yakshas, hungry ghosts, and vajra warriors abandoned their murals and flew out into the night. Golden light flashed as the images rushed forward to clash with the nightmares that swarmed the earth like a roiling tide.

“Capture the heart demon!” Li Jinglong shouted.

A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan attacked from above with the Zoroastrian gods’ manifestations, while the ghost king and his guards swung their dagger-axes again and again.

With the nightmares occupied, Li Jinglong poured his spiritual power into the Sword of Wisdom. He charged toward the heart demon and stabbed the creature with his radiant blade. Everyone turned, wide-eyed, to the center of the battlefield as the heart demon shuddered violently and emitted a horrible scream. “You… Even if you kill me…you…cannot stop…”

Demonic energy burst and scattered, carrying the heart demon’s deep and terrifying voice across the battlefield. Standing in the eye of the storm, Li Jinglong tightened his grip on his sword’s hilt and summoned up the last of his spiritual power, forcing the light of the heart lamp deep into the mass of darkness. Slowly, the black wisps dissipated, and before everyone’s anxious eyes, the nightmares around them began to fade and rise into the sky.

The black fire within the heart demon grew fainter and fainter, revealing a tightly spinning vortex at the creature’s center. Li Jinglong had stabbed his sword right into the middle of this dark spiral. Seeing it wobble as if about to collapse, everyone let out a sigh of relief.

A serpent, wreathed in obsidian flame, sprang from the heart of the vortex and sank its fangs into Li Jinglong’s arm.

Li Jinglong shouted in pain. His arm throbbed in acute agony, as if the serpent’s fangs had pierced his very soul. The power of the heart lamp was exhausted; dark flames licked up his right arm.

“Li Jinglong!”

“Chief!”

Everyone rushed toward them as the serpent coiled over itself on the ground and rose into the sky, jaws still locked around Li Jinglong’s right arm.

“Pathetic mortal,” its voice rang out. “You possess divine power, yet you know not how to use it.”

“Xie Yu!” the ghost king roared. “Release him!”

The serpent’s body rumbled with a brazen laugh, the sound ringing through the night sky. “You may have destroyed the heart demon seed, but you never expected to find me hiding here, did you?!”

Li Jinglong still held the Sword of Wisdom in his right hand. He fought to imbue the blade with spiritual power, but he had no more strength. The black flames seemed to have set fire to his soul, a torture like being burned alive.

The ghost king charged forward only to be swept away by a blast of wind. The dark lady, her long sleeves billowing, had appeared with the plague god at her side. The pair flew toward the ghost king, intercepting him.

“Ghost King, did you ever imagine this day would come?” she asked, her voice laced with malice.

The plague god smiled coldly. “Li Jinglong, for all your clever tricks, you surely never dreamed the heart demon seed was His Majesty himself.”

As Li Jinglong fought to free his arm, he heard a great shout from the Mogao Caves.

The fiery serpent’s eyes widened as the demonic flames wreathing his body dimmed and dwindled, as if stripped away by the winds of a hurricane. He loosened his hold on Li Jinglong and let out a furious hiss. “Hongjun!”

Hongjun had leapt up into the air and grasped Xie Yu by his flicking tail, which was already crumbling beneath his hands. Hungry black flames crawled up his left arm, streaming into his heart. Xie Yu struggled in vain as the inky flames faded, revealing the near-transparent shell of his serpentlike body.

Li Jinglong yanked his arm free. Everyone standing before the Mogao Caves had their eyes fixed on Hongjun, who remained suspended in midair. He had absorbed all of Xie Yu’s demonic fire—the black jiao howled furiously as he twisted in Hongjun’s grip, bared his fangs, and sprang toward Hongjun’s head.

Hongjun tightened his left hand around Xie Yu’s tail and held out his right as the jiao lunged toward him. A blast of jet-black fire shot from his palm. Xie Yu instantly disintegrated, transforming into specks of light that drifted toward the horizon.

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Stunned by this turn of events, the dark lady and the plague god didn't dare fight on. As the yao turned to flee, Hongjun formed a sword seal and drew a sigil in the air. Twin beams of obsidian energy shot out, wrapping around the two yao's heads. Hongjun gave a yank, and the pair screamed in agony as they were crushed to dust.

A breathless hush fell over the battlefield. Hongjun gathered the demonic fire back into himself with a violent shudder before slowly making his descent, landing softly on the ground. He looked down at his left hand. Black mist spread slowly up his arm from the center of his palm, oozed toward his heart, then faded to nothing.

Li Jinglong staggered over to him, dragging the Sword of Wisdom behind him. He seemed like he wanted to speak—perhaps to berate Hongjun for breaking his promise, or blame himself for his own helplessness—yet in the end, he said nothing.

The two faced each other in silence. Hongjun was first to look away, avoiding Li Jinglong's gaze as he turned and trudged back to the nine-storied pagoda.

By the time everyone got back inside, the sun had risen. Their group was exhausted beyond measure. Now that the fight was over, A-Tai, Li Jinglong, Mergen, and the carp yao gathered to fill Qiu Yongsi in on everything he'd missed.

"I'd no idea so much had happened." Qiu Yongsi sighed. "As soon as I received the chief's letter, I called on a jiao that owed the Qiu family a favor and asked it to bring me here as quickly as possible. I went first to Liang Prefecture, where General Geshu Han told me to head to Yumen Pass. I spotted you guys on my way there."

After a brief pause, Li Jinglong asked, "You can ride that jiao?"

"Only three times," Qiu Yongsi responded. "This was the last one."

Mergen exhaled slowly and leaned against the table, tilting his head back to look up at the murals on the walls. "I've found the white deer, but he's lost all his spiritual energy."

“I was the one who came up with the idea of cutting off his antlers,” Li Jinglong said. “The fault lies with me.”

“It’s fine,” Mergen said with a wave of his hand. “We saved him, so everything will be all right. But Hongjun…”

“I never expected the demon seed to be inside him,” A-Tai said quietly. “What was that thing that appeared at the end?”

Li Jinglong thought for a moment. “The ghost king said Xie Yu wishes to resurrect Mara. But he couldn’t find the true demon seed, so he used one of his three immortal souls to absorb malign energy from the nightmares collected by the white deer, condensing it into the heart demon we saw.”

“Then isn’t this a good thing?” A-Tai spread his hands. “The heart demon has been dealt with, and Xie Yu has been weakened. As long as we can guarantee the demon seed inside Hongjun’s body doesn’t cause trouble, we should be safe.”

Li Jinglong hummed in agreement and kneaded at the space between his brows. “But Xie Yu is still alive. Now that he knows about Hongjun, he won’t give up so easily.”

Over the course of their journey, the truth had gradually come to light: Hongjun had inherited the demon seed from his father, who had possessed the powers of both the demonic and divine and was destined to become the next incarnation of Mara. However, due to a strange twist of fate, Hongjun had been taken to Yaojin Palace as a child and placed under Chong Ming’s protection. Unable to find the demon seed, Xie Yu had instead attempted to create a demon seed of his own.

“No wonder,” Mergen murmured.

“No wonder what?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

Mergen and Li Jinglong exchanged a glance. No wonder yaoguai were always looking for Hongjun when he was a child; no wonder his parents Kong Xuan and Jia Yuze had died protecting him; no wonder he’d said, *There’s a monster inside my body.*

“Where’s Hongjun now?” Qiu Yongsi asked.

“Lu Xu’s with him,” Li Jinglong answered with a sigh. “We have to think of a way to remove the demon seed.”

“Do you really think you’ll succeed when even his dad failed?” Mergen asked.

Li Jinglong fell silent.

“Well, in any case,” Qiu Yongsi said, “at least we’re all together again. As for the demon seed—I’m sure we can contain it, as long as we protect him properly. It’s just that it might get a bit exhausting for the chief.”

“I’m afraid I can’t protect him properly,” Li Jinglong said.

“I’m sure you can!” A-Tai said.

“You definitely can,” Mergen concurred. “Chief, it’s up to you now.”

“Chief,” Qiu Yongsi said, looking at him earnestly. “If you can’t do it, no one can.”

A few halls away, Hongjun sat before the railing and gazed out at the brilliant dawn. The stark lines of the railing’s bars cutting through the scenery beyond put him in mind of a prison cell.

“Lu Xu,” Hongjun said, his brow furrowed. “What were you thinking back there? Are you so desperate to die?”

Lu Xu knew Hongjun was rebuking him for what he’d done after activating the array. “If I trapped the heart demon inside my body, it would be easier to kill.”

“But you would die too.”

“Everyone dies. After I died, I would just be reincarnated.”

“But you wouldn’t remember this,” Hongjun said. “You would become a different Lu Xu.”

Lu Xu settled beside Hongjun, who wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. “Don’t ever do that again,” Hongjun said softly.

“Mm.” Lu Xu lay down, pillowing his head on Hongjun’s leg.

“Can you still make me dream?” Hongjun asked. “I want to see my parents.”

“Not anymore,” Lu Xu murmured, looking up at Hongjun. He reached out and pressed a hand to Hongjun’s forehead. “My antlers haven’t grown out yet.”

“How long will it take?”

Lu Xu shook his head—he didn’t know.

“Was that dream real?” Hongjun asked.

Lu Xu didn’t answer. Hongjun’s heart slowly sank.

“When the heart demon controlled me and submerged you in that nightmare, I…saw your past.”

“It was real.” Hongjun answered his own question.

“But there’s still much in your past that has yet to be uncovered,” Lu Xu said uneasily. “Your memories were sealed; you’re missing too many of your past recollections, especially those that have to do with…that man—Li Jinglong—from when you first met until you separated. Do you know who sealed your memory?”

Hongjun frowned. Back when he’d accidentally dosed himself with oblivion pollen, he’d been assaulted by the memory of Qing Xiong coming to find him. But the words he’d said had been a blur; Hongjun couldn’t remember them.

“Was it Qing Xiong?” Hongjun mumbled.

“Whoever it was, maybe they sealed Li Jinglong’s memory as well.” Lu Xu regarded Hongjun intently. “Hongjun, you’re so pretty.”

The deep furrow in Hongjun’s brow relaxed. Coming back to his senses, he offered Lu Xu a stiff smile. “I’m sleepy,” Hongjun said quietly.

“Sleep, then,” Lu Xu said. “You’ll feel better after you do.”

“Tell me more about my dad,” Hongjun said, lying down while Lu Xu sat back up.

“Let’s not talk about that. It’s all in the past,” Lu Xu said.

Hongjun closed his eyes; before he knew it, he’d fallen asleep.

A short while later, Li Jinglong’s towering figure blocked the entrance of the hall. Glancing up, Lu Xu rose and brushed past Li Jinglong to take his leave. Li Jinglong knelt down beside the slumbering Hongjun and studied him in silence.

Li Jinglong’s face was still bruised from Hongjun’s punch. After a few moments, he sighed deeply and lay down next to Hongjun.

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Chapter 69:
Holiday Reunion

ALL WAS QUIET in the nine-storied pagoda. It was the end of the year, when the painters all left the Mogao Caves. They formed a convoy and rushed back home to the Hexi region to celebrate the new year.

Li Jinglong woke at nightfall. Hongjun, still sound asleep, had unconsciously wrapped himself around Li Jinglong in his slumber. Rapid footsteps sounded outside. A second later, Mergen appeared in the doorway and beckoned to Li Jinglong—something urgent had come up. Li Jinglong narrowed his eyes and gingerly got to his feet.

"How is he?" Mergen asked quietly.

"I'll talk to him when he wakes up," Li Jinglong responded. "What happened?"

"The ghost king is leaving."

Li Jinglong quickly made his way down from the ninth floor. The ghost king and his personal guards were waiting outside the entrance to bid him farewell.

"There's something else I wish to consult you about," Li Jinglong said in a rush. "Please stay a few more days."

But the ghost king seemed to have guessed Li Jinglong's question. "I don't know what the phoenix of Yaojin Palace intends, but surely it's no coincidence that the heart lamp resides within your body."

Li Jinglong started in surprise.

The ghost king laid a hand on Li Jinglong's shoulder. "Xie Yu lives, and Liu Fei has yet to be avenged. But whether Mara is resurrected remains to be seen."

Grasping at this thread of hope, Li Jinglong asked, "Can the demon seed in Hongjun's body be suppressed?"

The ghost king shrugged. "This is a question I cannot answer." Li Jinglong considered this quietly as the ghost king continued, "At the end of

the day, humans and yao walk different paths. Given my position, I cannot give you much more help in this regard. But perhaps we can make a temporary agreement."

Li Jinglong looked up at the ghost king.

"The fallen corpse ghosts have caused trouble in the human realm," the ghost king went on. "Although we were under the control of the white deer, Liu Fei and I are not free of blame."

"The fault lies with Xie Yu, not you," Li Jinglong answered.

"But how will you explain this when you return to your imperial court?" the ghost king asked. "Will the border generals who guard your frontier in the human realm simply ignore the two hundred thousand corpse ghosts who lie sleeping in Yardang?"

Li Jinglong thought for a moment before answering. "Liu Fei is dead; he has already made amends."

The ghost king nodded. Li Jinglong continued, "As for Yardang, I have my own ways of ensuring no one will disturb your slumber. His Majesty promised me a plot of land, and I intend to choose Yardang. I'll ask Hongjun's uncle to guard Yumen Pass so no one will intrude on you again."

"In that case, take this." The ghost king handed Li Jinglong a rusty piece of iron armor. "I will do my best to help you defeat Xie Yu. With this, you may summon the army under my command to fight for you on one occasion."

Li Jinglong accepted the armor and cupped his hands in thanks. The ghost king said no more; mounting his horse, he took his leave, disappearing into the sunset with his guards.

By the time Li Jinglong walked back into the nine-storied pagoda, everyone was yawning as they woke from sleep. Looking around, Li Jinglong said, "To think that we would end up all together like this."

Even he was surprised. Qiu Yongsi reclined lazily on a couch. "I came all this way on New Year's just to help my brothers fight—do you think it's been a relaxing trip?"

Indeed—it was already the last day of the year. "Very well," Li Jinglong said. "Never mind all of this. Let's make dinner and celebrate the

new year!”

A-Tai smiled. “The last time I celebrated your new year was five years ago. Is there wine?”

Li Jinglong had made the arrangements for their celebration in advance. Just as he finished assigning everyone a task, Lu Xu arrived. The whole room turned to look at him.

Lu Xu shot Li Jinglong an uneasy look, and Mergen patted the seat behind him, motioning for him to sit.

Knowing Li Jinglong wanted to ask about Hongjun, Lu Xu preempted him: “He’s okay. Whatever you want to know, you should ask him yourself. It’s better than asking me.”

Li Jinglong nodded. “I’ll go slaughter a chicken. Let’s wake Hongjun later; he can sleep a little longer.”

Within seconds, the Department of Exorcism was in motion. A-Tai went to find Ashina Adarvan to knead dough so they could share a sumptuous meal at the end of the year. Mergen and Lu Xu sat down in the courtyard and began to peel chestnuts, preparing to make roasted chestnut chicken. Li Jinglong handled slaughtering the chicken while Qiu Yongsi and the carp yao set out the tableware.

“Ay, why would a bunch of grown men come to a barren place like this to celebrate the new year?” Qiu Yongsi asked the carp yao, torn between laughter and tears. “I really don’t get it.”

“Right?” the carp yao concurred. “We don’t even have any fish.”

At this reminder, Qiu Yongsi stopped in place. “That’s true. How can we have a year of plenty if our feast lacks plenty of fish?”

The carp yao had no response.

In the courtyard, Mergen and Lu Xu sat side by side in silence. Mergen’s hands were strong; he cracked the chestnuts with a pinch of his fingers, then tossed them to Lu Xu, who peeled them open.

“Lu Xu,” Mergen began. “Are you still angry with me?”

After listening to Hongjun's explanation in the mural, Mergen had realized Lu Xu followed him all the way to Liang Prefecture because he hoped Mergen would save him. The part of Lu Xu trapped in the mural had pinned his last hopes on the gray wolf.

"I once made a vow," Lu Xu said absently. "It was in the *Amitabha Pure Land Tableau* when they weren't paying attention."

"What did you vow?" Mergen looked up at him.

"I swore that, whoever came to save me, I'd be theirs for the rest of my life." Lu Xu glanced down at the creamy-white chestnuts in his hand before tossing them into the wooden tub.

Mergen went mute.

Lu Xu lifted his eyes to look at Mergen but said nothing.

"I didn't know," Mergen tried.

"Well, now you do."

"Lu Xu, my life's mission was to find you," Mergen said quietly.

"I don't care what your fucking mission is—and in any case, in the end it wasn't you who came to save me."

"You're not being fair!" Mergen protested. "I didn't know it was you!"

"Did Hongjun know?" Lu Xu retorted.

The chestnuts Mergen held cracked from how tightly he was squeezing them. "That's not fair!" he repeated with a frown.

"You only came to find me because I'm the white deer. Whether it's me or someone else, it's all the same to you."

"It's not the same—it's not the same, Lu Xu!" Mergen stared at him. There were many words he wanted to say, but for some reason, he found himself incapable of uttering a single one of them when they reached his lips. At last he squeezed out, "I thought the white deer would be a beautiful girl."

"Well, I'm neither beautiful nor a girl."

“I thought perhaps she wasn’t aware she was the white deer. But once I found her, I would love her and take proper care of her…”

Lu Xu arched a brow, gesturing for Mergen to hurry and pass the chestnuts; he’d been waiting for ages. Mergen tossed him the next handful and pressed ahead: “But everything happened so quickly I didn’t have the time to think. I never considered the possibility of us both being…men. I didn’t expect you to be the white deer.”

“What exactly are you trying to say?” Lu Xu asked.

“We’re destined to be together!” Mergen blurted.

“Oh? Why didn’t I know about it, then?” Lu Xu looked Mergen up and down. “Who’d want to be destined to be with *you*?”

“Why else would you seek me out in Yulin?” Mergen asked.

“I couldn’t think clearly back then!” Lu Xu snapped. “I’m in my right mind now, all right?”

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Mergen finally lost his temper. “What’s that supposed to mean?! I risked my life to save you too. Just because Hongjun was the one who got you out in the end doesn’t mean you can just—”

“Hey, how much chicken are you guys planning to make?” Ashina Adarvan cut in, staring at the tub with his hands covered in flour. “That’s a heck of a lot of chestnuts.”

“Shut up!” Lu Xu and Mergen snapped in unison. Lu Xu jumped to his feet and stormed off.

Hongjun was halfway through his nap when he was roused by a chicken’s dying screams. Li Jinglong had never slaughtered a chicken before. He pinned the poor creature down and tried to let its blood by severing its neck, but cut it in the wrong place. The chicken squawked, its wings flapping madly as it ran in circles with its half-severed head dangling at a grotesque angle, trailing blood all over the ground.

“Can you shut that thing up?!” Hongjun shouted, opening his eyes.

He stumbled sleepily to the railing and took in the sight of Li Jinglong chasing the desperately struggling chicken. A flick of a throwing knife, and the chicken pitched over onto the ground with a gurgled cluck. The world settled back into silence.

Li Jinglong’s head shot up, his hands covered in blood. “Hongjun!”

Hongjun ducked back inside. Li Jinglong bounded up the stairs, but Hongjun brushed past him and came down to pick up the chicken. Li Jinglong followed him back down again, looking awkward as the two of them stared at each other.

“What are you doing?” Hongjun asked with a furrowed brow.

“It’s New Year’s Eve,” Li Jinglong said by way of answer.

Hongjun nodded.

Li Jinglong boiled some water and settled down in a side courtyard to pluck the chicken, a handful of feathers at a time. His right hand was still trembling; Xie Yu’s bite the night before had damaged his meridians. Hongjun eyed him, but said nothing.

He couldn’t help studying Li Jinglong. Li Jinglong clearly sensed how distant Hongjun had been with him these past few days. He trod carefully, as if afraid to anger Hongjun. Looking at the ring of bruises around Li Jinglong’s eye from his own fist, Hongjun suddenly felt a bit guilty.

“Are you still mad at me?” Li Jinglong asked as he plucked the chicken.

Hongjun’s heart twinged.

“It’s because I’m useless, isn’t it?” he asked, looking up at Hongjun. “Are you still upset?”

“No,” Hongjun answered. “Why are you so worried about me? You’d do better to worry about yourself.”

Li Jinglong flipped the chicken over and continued plucking. “You don’t like me worrying about you?”

“I can take care of myself.”

“You’re upset, but you won’t talk to me,” Li Jinglong said. “You’ve been more open with Mergen, Tigra, and—if my guess is correct—you’ll even talk to Yongsi, now that he’s here.” He looked up again. “You’re even willing to talk to Lu Xu. I don’t understand. Did I do something wrong?”

Hongjun stared at Li Jinglong in a daze. What should he say? For a moment, he had a powerful urge to come clean—but what good would it do to tell him? Li Jinglong had forgotten the past. Would he feel guilty after learning the truth?

“Actually, Lu Xu and I knew each other a long time ago,” Hongjun said at last.

“He told me,” Li Jinglong said blandly. “How nice.”

He flipped the chicken over again, and the two of them stared down at the half-plucked bird in Li Jinglong’s hands. “Ever since you woke up from your nightmare, you’ve been mad at me,” Li Jinglong said. “Is it because I kept you in the dark?”

“It’s not that,” Hongjun responded.

Li Jinglong turned his head and pointed at his black eye. “What if I let you punch me again? Gege just doesn’t want you to be afraid, or for you to think you’re a burden.”

“It’s really not that.”

“Then what is it?”

Hongjun fell silent again. Li Jinglong dropped his gaze and went back to plucking the chicken. “Hongjun, do you think I’m smart?”

“You’re super smart,” Hongjun responded. “You’re the smartest person I know.”

“But I can’t figure out why you’re mad at me.” Li Jinglong lifted his eyes to look at Hongjun, his gaze so lost Hongjun’s heart ached.

“I’m not mad at you,” Hongjun said.

“You are,” Li Jinglong countered. “Ever since you woke up, you’ve been different. I admit it’s my fault. Ever since that day in Liang Prefecture, I’ve made mistake after mistake. I wish I could turn back time to that night. I should never have gone out and left you.”

After a beat of silence, Hongjun said, “I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“I promised I would go with you to Yaojin Palace,” Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun wanted to refuse—he couldn’t forget what he’d seen in his dream—but he couldn’t utter the words. He stood silent.

“Hey, Li!” Ashina Adarvan called from the second floor. “How long are you planning to spend plucking that chicken? It’s smoother than your noble consort’s face!”

Hongjun seized his chance to slip away. It took all Li Jinglong’s willpower to hold himself back from punching Ashina Adarvan.

Qiu Yongsi and the carp yao sat side by side before a frozen river. Each had a rod in hand, in the middle of fishing through a hole cut into the ice.

“Why do I have to go fishing when I’m a fish?” the carp yao asked.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Qiu Yongsi asked in return. “It would be inauspicious not to have fish on the table for New Year’s Eve. Unless you think we should toss you into a stewpot.”

The carp yao quickly shut his mouth.

Within the nine-storied pagoda, Li Jinglong was busy moving their banquet to the furthest ancillary hall where the painters usually gathered, fearing the Buddha would take offense if they served food and wine in the Mogao Caves themselves.

“How is he?” Mergen asked as he helped move the tables; Li Jinglong’s right hand hadn’t stopped shaking.

“Still angry,” Li Jinglong replied. “I can’t get him to talk. What about you?”

“Not much better off,” Mergen said.

As they chatted, Lu Xu came in and glanced at them. They immediately fell silent.

It had been a full day and night since Hongjun last ate, and he was ravenous. Following his nose to the table, he pushed all thoughts of demon seeds, nightmares, yao, and Mara to the back of his mind and hurriedly took his seat.

With a whoop of laughter, Qiu Yongsi threw himself over Hongjun’s shoulders. Hongjun squawked in surprise and nearly smacked him.

“I missed you!” Qiu Yongsi said with a laugh.

“You actually came!” Hongjun exclaimed.

Qiu Yongsi thumped Hongjun on the back and hugged him tight. “It’s lucky I made it in time.” He leaned in to Hongjun’s ear and whispered, “Don’t be afraid. No matter what happens, we’re all with you.”

Hongjun looked up at Qiu Yongsi in silence. Qiu Yongsi offered him a warm smile before turning to take a seat at another table. A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan trickled in last. A-Tai batted his lashes at Hongjun, and Hongjun burst into laughter.

Everyone tactfully avoided the subject of the demon seed. Once Lu Xu took his place next to Hongjun, Li Jinglong announced, “We’ve prepared quite a feast today; there’s no way to divide it up neatly. Let’s push all the tables together so everyone can help themselves.”

“Where’s Zhao Zilong?” Hongjun asked.

“Here,” the carp yao piped up from the table.

Everyone stared.

The carp yao flicked his tail from where he lay on a plate. He was covered in garlic, ginger, and scallions; whoever had garnished this dish had stopped just short of steaming him.

“Just for the festive occasion—may you all have a year of plenty, now that your feast includes plenty of fish!”

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Chapter 70:
A Pair of Horses on a Snowy Field

LI JINGLONG PERSONALLY poured wine for everyone. “To think we’d all be gathered here today—perhaps this, too, is a mysterious working of the will of heaven. We’ve also welcomed two new friends…”

Hongjun leaned back in his seat, allowing Li Jinglong to fill his cup. Beside him, Lu Xu regarded the wine in his cup stonily, as if to say, *Who are you calling your “friend”?*

“This is our end-of-the-year feast,” Li Jinglong said as he poured his own wine and lifted his cup. “To all your hard work this year—cheers!”

The carp yao flipped to his feet. Shaking scallions from his scales, he joined the toast. “Cheers!”

Li Jinglong waited for the carp yao to finish drinking before tossing back the contents of his own cup; the others followed suit.

“You guys let the carp drink first?” Ashina Adarvan asked.

“He’s our boss,” A-Tai explained.

“Everyone, help yourselves,” the carp yao decreed.

Li Jinglong shook his head in resignation as everyone picked up their chopsticks. Hongjun’s dove immediately for the roasted chestnut chicken; he was so hungry he had no mind for anything else. Before he could serve himself, Li Jinglong plucked a drumstick and placed it in Hongjun’s bowl.

“What a year it’s been,” Qiu Yongsi said with a smile. “When we parted ways at Mount Li, I thought for sure we’d never see each other again.”

A-Tai laughed. “Look who’s talking—you were the last to arrive!”

“When are we going back to the Spring Oriole?” Mergen joked.

Everyone burst into laughter. Ashina Adarvan asked A-Tai what the Spring Oriole was, and Lu Xu turned to ask Hongjun. Hongjun’s mouth was stuffed full of food, so he merely waved a hand, promising to explain later.

Halfway through the meal, Li Jinglong sighed. “Once tonight is over, we’re all going our separate ways again, aren’t we?”

“No, we’re not,” Qiu Yongsi said hastily. “We’re not separating! Let’s go back to Chang’an together!”

Li Jinglong blinked in surprise.

“Now that we know about Xie Yu, I’ll be working with you guys,” Qiu Yongsi explained.

“I was planning on returning to the Department of Exorcism with Adarvan after this too,” A-Tai admitted.

Stomach full at last, Hongjun finally perked up. “Why’s that?”

“We’re broke,” Ashina Adarvan replied. “This wastrel A-Tai spent it all. We’ve got to go to Chang’an and make some money. Otherwise, with this spendthrift eating through our coffers, we’ll never revive our nation.”

Everyone was lost for words.

Li Jinglong looked at them in exasperation. “The Department of Exorcism doesn’t make much either. The most ordinary expense costs us several thousand taels of silver.”

“Don’t you worry,” Ashina Adarvan said. “We have our own ways of earning money.”

“They’re sending me back to the Department of Exorcism in hopes that the chief will help grease the wheels so I can do some small-time business,” A-Tai finished gloomily.

Everyone laughed again.

“What about you?” Li Jinglong turned to Lu Xu.

Lu Xu looked at Hongjun, who glanced at Mergen. The most important thing in Mergen’s life was to find Lu Xu. “Why don’t you come back to the Department of Exorcism with us?” Hongjun suggested.

At Lu Xu’s nod, Mergen sighed in relief and flashed Hongjun a grateful smile.

“Now that that’s settled, drink up!” the carp yao declared.

“Boss, you’re a lightweight,” Li Jinglong cut in. “Allow me to drink on your behalf.”

But the carp yao insisted, so Li Jinglong had no choice but to pour him another cup. Everyone—save for Lu Xu, who abstained—grew livelier with wine warming their bellies. They reminisced over dinner about the battles they’d fought together over the past six months: breaking into Pingkang Ward in the middle of the night; the battle of Daming Palace; the mission at the examination grounds; getting trapped in the cave by the nine-tailed celestial fox and how Li Jinglong used the power of the heart lamp to get them out…

As Hongjun listened, the image of Li Jinglong’s expression when Baxia had caught Hongjun and nearly cut his ear off rose up in his mind. He couldn’t resist sneaking a glance at him. Li Jinglong, his handsome face flushed with wine, happened to be looking back. Their gazes caught, and Li Jinglong offered him a smile.

Li Jinglong pressed a hand to his injured right shoulder, loosening up his arm.“You guys left so suddenly, so I took Hongjun with me to the northwest, where I nearly got beheaded by Geshu Han.”

Hongjun laughed despite himself as he recalled their chaotic arrival at the capital of Liang Prefecture.

“You guys must have taken the scenic route here!” Mergen teased.

“The scenic route?” Li Jinglong snorted. “The young master is unaccustomed to riding. It was grueling work waiting on him.”

The memory of Li Jinglong smearing medicine over his thighs came to Hongjun unbidden. His face turned a vivid shade of crimson, but he made no response.

Li Jinglong had asked everyone else whether they’d be returning to the Department of Exorcism, but he hadn’t asked Hongjun. Perhaps, in his eyes, Hongjun was the only one who was certain to stay.

By now the carp yao was drunk; he took a few swaying steps before toppling over on the table. As their meal drew to a close, Li Jinglong raised his cup once more. “A final toast for tonight.”

Everyone held their cups aloft. Seeing Lu Xu was reluctant to drink, Hongjun offered, “I’ll drink yours.”

Mergen pried Lu Xu’s cup out of his hand. “I’ve got it.”

Lu Xu glanced at Mergen. After hearing so many stories about Chang’an and the Department of Exorcism, even he had begun to feel a flutter of anticipation. Turning to Hongjun, he asked, “Are all those stories true?”

Startled, Hongjun considered his question, then hummed in affirmation.

“Is Chang’an nice?”

“It only snows in the winter,” Hongjun said. “It’s a good place.”

“Chang’an is beautiful,” Mergen agreed. “When the time comes, we’ll take you to the department headquarters. You’ll like it.”

Lu Xu had slowly warmed up to Mergen’s attempts at conversation over the course of dinner. He nodded in response.

Silence settled over the table. Having eaten his fill, Hongjun set down his chopsticks and stared at Li Jinglong in a daze.

“Hongjun,” Li Jinglong said. “None of us have ever looked down on you. Everyone here has laid our lives on the line for each other.”

Hongjun looked around at his companions. Qiu Yongsi smiled. “When we were trapped at the blood pool, it was you and the chief who saved me.”

“If not for you two, we’d be dead by now,” Mergen agreed.

“Remember when the two of us went looking for this band of idiots?” A-Tai added.

Hongjun laughed. “I do.”

“You were the one who gave me the heart lamp,” Li Jinglong said. “If not for you, I’d still be nothing more than an ordinary man.”

At this, Hongjun averted his eyes.

Unexpectedly, it was Lu Xu who spoke next. “Many things in this world are inescapable—such is the will of heaven.”

“The will of heaven,” Li Jinglong echoed. “Just so. Hongjun, perhaps the heart lamp coming to reside in me was fate.”

Hongjun looked down in silence.

“In any case, you must know that no one here would spurn you,” Li Jinglong continued. “No one is afraid of the demon seed in you. We won’t treat you any differently either. We’ll all help you figure out how to remove the demon seed for good.”

“I think it really is the will of heaven, Hongjun,” Qiu Yongsi said. “And that’s why we have hope of defeating Mara.”

Hongjun nodded.

Smiling, Li Jinglong said, “Hongjun, if you have something to say, just say it. Don’t hold it in.”

“All right,” Hongjun said, returning his smile. “I won’t.”

“Let’s have one last drink!” Li Jinglong lifted his cup once more.

Lu Xu retrieved his cup from Mergen and followed suit.

“If this really is the last drink,” A-Tai said, “allow me to play something to accompany it!”

“My cousin wrote a new poem recently,” Qiu Yongsi offered. “It’s quite good. Come, let me sing it for you.”

Everyone was eager to hear it, so as A-Tai plucked his barbat, Qiu Yongsi began to sing. “*The swordsman of Zhao wears a tasseled helm, his curved Wu blade gleaming frost-bright; astride a white horse in a silver saddle, he rides as swift as a meteor’s flight!*”

Listening to the music, Hongjun forgot all his worries. *Is this poem truly written by a mortal man?* he wondered in awe.

“*He slays men at ten paces, rides a thousand miles unopposed; mission complete, he departs with a flick of his sleeves, the hero’s name undisclosed*.”

Everyone broke out in cheers. “Excellent!”

“This poem is by Li Bai, isn’t it?” Hongjun called out.

Everyone booed, shouting at Hongjun not to interrupt. Qiu Yongsi beamed as he continued to sing. The poem was soul-stirring, causing all who heard it to sink into deep thought.

"*Though he may die, his spirit lives on, a worthy hero of unparalleled might; who would choose a scholar's life, studying the classics till their hair turns white?*"[5]

The strings of A-Tai's barbat went still, and the room lapsed into silence.

"This is indeed by Li Bai," Qiu Yongsi said.

"Li Bai is your cousin?" Li Jinglong asked.

Hongjun's mouth dropped open.

"That's right," Qiu Yongsi confirmed.

Everyone was surprised to hear this, but what shocked Hongjun more was what Li Jinglong said next, mumbling absently to himself: "Why has he never mentioned this to me?" He looked back to Qiu Yongsi. "I'll have to ask him next time I see him. You can't just claim kinship on a whim."

"Go right ahead," Qiu Yongsi said with a grin.

"You know him too?" Hongjun asked Li Jinglong in astonishment.

It was the first time Hongjun had initiated a conversation with Li Jinglong in days. Li Jinglong, swaying a bit from the wine, turned to Hongjun with a brilliant smile and nodded. "Should I ask him to come have a chat with you the next time he comes to Chang'an?"

Hongjun was speechless. Li Jinglong actually *knew* Li Bai? And he'd never mentioned it?!

"Taibai-xiong loves wine. We met through drinking, and as it turns out, we're distantly related," Li Jinglong explained, still smiling. "I'm embarrassed to admit I'm not well-versed in poetry; I spent all my money on paintings, wine, tea, and food."

Li Jinglong was indeed widely known for his ability to eat, drink, and make merry. Though Qiu Yongsi had been born into a famous Han family, he fell short of Li Jinglong in this regard. Qiu Yongsi tapped his teacup with

his chopsticks. “My cousin places great importance on natural affinity. Hongjun, I think you should be able to arrange a meeting with him.”

“If there’s an opportunity, please introduce us!” Hongjun said.

“Okay,” Li Jinglong said, “I promise I’ll go and ask. If he refuses, I’ll get down on my knees and kowtow to him. And if that still doesn’t work, I’ll go and petition His Majesty to intervene. Worse comes to worst, I’ll truss him up and bring him to you so you can meet him face to face. A promise is a promise!”

Everyone burst into raucous laughter. Hongjun felt his face grow hot—but it was true Li Jinglong always treated him well, promising him such things unconditionally. As long as it was within his power, he never rejected any of Hongjun’s requests.

“Another of my cousins is also a poet,” Qiu Yongsi piped up again. “Would you like to hear one of his poems?”

“You have another?” Hongjun asked.

“*A youngster when I left home, an old man when I returned; though my hair has gone gray, my accent remains the same… The children who greet me know not my name; they smile as they ask me whence I came…*”[6]

“Isn’t that by He Zhizhang?”

“Yongsi, don’t flatter yourself!”

“You’re taking us for a ride!”

Everyone mocked Qiu Yongsi as he protested, “He really is my elder cousin!” Hongjun nearly fell over from laughing so hard. Qiu Yongsi was the picture of innocence. “So a number of my relatives are famous poets—what of it?!”

A-Tai strummed his barbat idly until Li Jinglong said, “Play ‘The Moon over the River on a Spring Evening.’ We’ll be returning to Chang’an in a few days. I’ve already grown sick of this place.”

Fingering a new chord, A-Tai readily agreed. Li Jinglong poured the last of the wine for himself, then scooted over to sling an arm around Hongjun’s shoulders.

Everyone sang “The Moon over the River on a Spring Evening” accompanied by the fluid notes of A-Tai’s barbat. The first time Li Jinglong had taken them all to the Spring Oriole, Hongjun remembered, they’d sat nestled together beside a folding screen while singing this same tune.

“Where would you like to go for fun when we get back?” Li Jinglong murmured into Hongjun’s ear, his words slightly slurred as he pressed closer.

“I haven’t decided,” Hongjun responded. Feeling a bit drunk himself, he added, “You’re…a real bastard.”

Li Jinglong began to laugh. “How am I a bastard? Go on, tell me.”

Hongjun said nothing as he burrowed his way into Li Jinglong’s arms, feeling like a moth rushing headlong into the blazing flame within Li Jinglong’s heart. Pressed against Li Jinglong’s chest, a wave of sorrow washed over him. His consciousness gradually blurred and slid away.

The last notes of the barbat faded. As A-Tai set the instrument aside, Li Jinglong nodded toward the rest of the room, motioning for the others to continue enjoying themselves. He scooped up Hongjun and carried him upstairs to put him to bed.

Lu Xu stared after Li Jinglong’s retreating figure. Mergen put his elbows on the table and turned his head to study him. “There’s something I should tell you,” he said softly.

He glanced at Mergen. Aside from a few nods, he’d hardly spoken to anyone besides Hongjun at dinner.

“The chief likes him,” Mergen said, a bit unsteady against the table. He wiggled his eyebrows and continued, “He refuses to admit it, but everyone can tell.”

Lu Xu eyed Mergen, then asked quietly, “What does that have to do with you?”

Mergen shrugged silently. “It has nothing to do with me. Sometimes when I see them, I feel happy; other times, I feel sad.” His voice grew softer and softer. “Do you understand that feeling? He has someone like Hongjun following him around every day, looking at him…with a smile on his face. Just like this… Look…”

Mergen smiled, his eyes shining with affection. “A look like that says, ‘You hold me in your heart, just as I hold you in mine. It’s wonderful to be alive.’”

The carp yao flopped over on the table, startling Lu Xu so badly he nearly upended his bowl. With a strangled laugh, Mergen patted the carp yao. “Forget it. I’ll go and sleep with the boss. Happy New Year, Lu Xu.” He called out, “My dear brothers! Happy New Year!”

Mergen picked up the carp yao and clasped his hands in a slight bow toward A-Tai and Qiu Yongsi, who stood and bowed in return. A-Tai hooked a flirtatious finger under Lu Xu’s chin as he dipped down, earning himself a kick from Mergen as Lu Xu looked on with a wooden expression.

Upstairs, Li Jinglong tucked Hongjun into bed in one of the vacant rooms.

“I can’t sleep with you tonight. I have to write a letter to His Highness first,” he whispered before sliding a red envelope beneath Hongjun’s pillow. He took his leave, closing the door behind him.

Some time later, Hongjun opened his eyes, his head throbbing. He could hear Ashina Adarvan and A-Tai singing “heyo” at each other in a call and response. Reaching under his pillow, he pulled out the red envelope and opened it to find a banknote for a hundred taels of silver.

He rose silently, tucking the envelope into his lapels and pulling on a fur cloak before tiptoeing out the door.

The swirling snowflakes had blanketed the ground in a thick layer of white. The grottoes of the Mogao Caves looked like a golden paradise, the light of the everlasting altar lamps shining brightly through the snowy night.

“Happy New Year, my brothers,” Hongjun said quietly, wrapping his knee-length cloak tighter around himself as he led his horse out into the night. He mounted his steed and rode around to the back of the nine-storied pagoda, leaving the Mogao Caves by the southeast road.

“It’s snowing!” Mergen shouted as he leaned against the railing. “The monsters are coming!”

“Who’s coming?” Ashina Adarvan called out as he stumbled outside to empty his bladder. Standing in the snow, he noticed a fresh track of hoofprints leading into the distance.

Nearly everyone had returned to their rooms to sleep; only Li Jinglong and Qiu Yongsi, both night owls, came out to take a look. Recalling Hongjun’s comments earlier that day, Li Jinglong raced up to Hongjun’s room and threw open the doors. The bed was empty.

Hongjun galloped through the snow. He had only made it a few miles following the Great Wall when he heard shouts carried to him on the wind.

“*Hongjun!*” Li Jinglong yelled.

He glanced back and saw Li Jinglong a distance behind him. Hongjun set his heels to his horse’s flanks, picking up speed.

“Hongjun!” Li Jinglong bellowed. He’d thrown a fur cloak over his underclothes, shoved his feet into his boots, and grabbed the Sword of Wisdom before leaping onto his horse and chasing after Hongjun.

Hongjun swerved into the woods and dismounted, taking his horse by the reins as he hid amid the foliage. He watched for Li Jinglong through the gaps of the trees.

“Hongjun! Where are you?!” Li Jinglong doubled back along the road and slid off of his horse, examining the tracks on the ground.

Snow drifted over Hongjun until he blended with the trees. Li Jinglong couldn’t see him in the dark, and the wail of the storm drowned out the soft sound of Hongjun’s breathing. After scanning the forest, Li Jinglong got back on his horse and galloped onward.

Shaking off snow, Hongjun mounted his horse and changed direction, heading due east.

The snowstorm gradually abated, and the sun rose. Buffeted by the wind, Hongjun had long since sobered up. He rode steadily onward, his mind blank and his vision filled with a boundless stretch of white. Passing through a valley, he recalled his companions’ words from the night before. A wave of loneliness and despair coursed through his heart, accompanied by a prickle of doubt: *Should I go back?*

As he slowed, a figure appeared out of the endless snow—Li Jinglong had been lying here in wait. “Hongjun! Where are you going?!”

He was the last person Hongjun wanted to see. Hongjun snapped the reins, and his horse bolted into the distance.

“Don’t leave!” Li Jinglong shouted.

“Go back!” Hongjun called over his shoulder.

Li Jinglong pursued Hongjun through the valley. As Hongjun galloped faster and faster, Li Jinglong shouted, “Slow down! I won’t force you to go back! Just talk to me!”

But Hongjun didn’t slow. The sun rose. Li Jinglong shadowed him until the sun reached its zenith, the official road on which they traveled silvered with snow in the bright noon light.

“I’ll stop chasing you!” Li Jinglong shouted again. “But you need to slow down! Your horse can’t keep up this pace! You can’t either!”

After such a long and bumpy ride, Hongjun was exhausted. He had traveled nearly twelve hours straight, and his strength was beginning to flag. His horse widened the distance between him and Li Jinglong once more, then gradually slowed. Li Jinglong stayed quiet, keeping pace with him from afar. He sped up when Hongjun sped up, slowed down when Hongjun slowed down, and stopped when Hongjun stopped, never inching any closer.

The sun kissed the western horizon as Hongjun turned around and shouted again, “Go back!”

Li Jinglong followed him in silence. Abruptly, Hongjun remembered that while he had Chong Ming’s phoenix feather and didn’t have to fear the cold, Li Jinglong had no such artifact. After riding from sunup to sundown, he’d probably get sick again.

Hongjun’s brain felt like paste. He wanted to go back to the Taihang Mountains and pry answers from Chong Ming and Qing Xiong. Qing Xiong had taken him away that day, and he must have told Chong Ming what had happened. Yet at the same time, he was afraid that what the ghost king said was true—Chong Ming had been the one to set everything in motion, and Hongjun was no more than a pawn to be sacrificed in his father’s place.

Equally terrifying was the possibility that Li Jinglong had been there that day when Qing Xiong had come for him.

If that was true, what should he do?

The very foundations of his heart would shatter the moment this truth was revealed.

Hongjun slowed his horse to a walk. The curtain of night had fallen, and the sky was scattered with stars. He had run for a full night and day, and Li Jinglong had followed him for the same span.

Hongjun looked over his shoulder. Li Jinglong was no longer behind him.

He went back?

The thought was followed immediately by a sense of foreboding. Wheeling his horse around, he galloped back the way he'd come.

He found Li Jinglong's horse shivering by the side of the official road. Li Jinglong's crumpled form lay in the snow, still as a corpse.

"Chief!" Hongjun shouted frantically. He was still a dozen steps away when he vaulted off his horse and sprinted over on foot.

Li Jinglong was almost buried in the snow, his hands cold as ice as he curled in on himself. Hongjun hastily turned him over. "Chief!"

To his surprise, Li Jinglong hooked his arms around Hongjun's shoulders. Hongjun struggled to break free, but Li Jinglong yanked him closer and flipped them over.

"Stop! I said stop! Stop—!"

Hongjun grappled with Li Jinglong in the snow. Mustering all his strength, Li Jinglong knocked Hongjun to the ground and pinned him beneath his own body. He grabbed Hongjun's wrists, forcing them above his head, and straddled him, keeping him firmly in place.

"Why wouldn't you wait for me?!" Li Jinglong shouted at Hongjun, furious. "What did I do wrong now?!"

It was the first time Li Jinglong had ever truly spoken to him in anger. Hongjun instinctively pried a hand free to reach for his throwing knives, only for Li Jinglong to seize his wrist again.

“You hate me, don’t you?” Li Jinglong’s voice was shaking. “I’ve always treated you well—on this my conscience is clear! But you hate me. Why?!”

Li Jinglong’s hands trembled violently. His grip went slack, allowing Hongjun to grab hold of his throwing knives. “You want to kill me? Because you’re a yao and I’m a human? Because I killed your kin?”

“No… No…” Hongjun gasped.

“Then do it!” Li Jinglong yelled at Hongjun as if he had lost his mind. “Go ahead! Stab me right here! You can take the heart lamp back! Take it!”

Hongjun looked up hazily at Li Jinglong. The rims of Li Jinglong’s eyes were red; tears were streaming down his face. He tore his robes open with one hand to bare his chest and grabbed Hongjun’s wrist with the other, pressing the knife to his own heart.

Heaven and earth, the wild landscape, the snowy field, the galaxy spinning above—all was silent save for the sound of their breaths, gentle as the eternal tide.

Hongjun stared at the tattoo that marked the left side of his chest: a peacock with its wings elegantly outspread.

Li Jinglong’s hot tears fell on Hongjun’s face. At that moment, the sorrow buried in Hongjun’s heart could no longer be suppressed. His throwing knife slipped from his fingers, the blade landing in the snow with a whisper. Li Jinglong released his wrists.

Hongjun threw his arms around him, burying his face in his shoulder as he burst into hysterical tears.

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Chapter 71:
A Promise Not Made Lightly

TWO HOURS LATER, Hongjun pushed open the door of an abandoned house.

They'd stopped for the night in a village that had been attacked by the fallen corpse ghosts. The residents had been massacred, leaving the place completely deserted.

After securing their horses outside, Li Jinglong took a seat next to Hongjun on the floor, the two of them pressed together as he lit the stove. Hongjun tried to tuck his phoenix feather into Li Jinglong's underrobe, but Li Jinglong pushed his hand away. "I'm not cold."

Hongjun reached up to check his forehead; Li Jinglong snatched his hand away and held it clasped between his palms. They stared quietly into the fire for a spell.

"Missing home?"

"No," Hongjun said mournfully.

"I'm sure Chong Ming didn't mean it," Li Jinglong said in an attempt to comfort him. "He's your dad—he won't really forbid you from going home."

"The only reason I'm going is to learn the truth," Hongjun said.

Li Jinglong's brow creased. Hongjun murmured, "I once considered Yaojin Palace my home…but after learning about the past, I'm not sure anymore."

He recounted to Li Jinglong what the ghost king had revealed. Li Jinglong listened in shock. Morose, Hongjun concluded, "I thought Yaojin Palace was my home, but maybe that was just my own wishful thinking."

"Come back with me," Li Jinglong said suddenly.

Hongjun looked up at Li Jinglong in surprise, as Li Jinglong repeated, "Come back with me to the Department of Exorcism. The

Department is your home now. I promise—”

Li Jinglong unwound his arm from around Hongjun’s shoulders and laid his palm on Hongjun’s chest. He grabbed Hongjun’s hand and pulled it over, securing Hongjun’s palm over his own heart in turn.

“For as long as my heart beats, Hongjun,” Li Jinglong said solemnly, “you will never become Mara, or any other monster. You will always have a place by my side, and as long as the Department of Exorcism exists, you will always have a home you can return to. As long as I live, I’ll be waiting for you at the Department of Exorcism when you push open its doors.”

Hongjun’s heart hammered in his chest, as if a frozen river deep inside him was slowly splintering with a thunderous rumble.

“I… I…” Hongjun didn’t know what to say. His eyes met Li Jinglong’s before darting away again. “I’m not going back,” he said finally.

“Then I’ll go with you,” Li Jinglong said. “Whatever your destination, I’ll go with you.”

Hongjun’s breath quickened. What was wrong with him today? Ever since Li Jinglong had caught up with him, he’d been on edge. He half hated Li Jinglong, but the feeling was accompanied by another inexplicable, unfamiliar emotion. When Li Jinglong had shouted, *I’ve always treated you well*, Hongjun had felt as if he could hardly breathe.

“What is it now?” Li Jinglong asked, perplexed.

“Nothing,” Hongjun hastily said. “I’m just tired. I’ll try to sleep for a while.”

Li Jinglong wrapped an arm around him again. “Go on then.”

It was freezing out, and Li Jinglong’s embrace was as warm as ever, but now, it stirred a new feeling in Hongjun. After riding hard for over a day, Li Jinglong smelled faintly of sweat, and the warm light in his chest captivated Hongjun, putting him completely at ease.

It was the best sleep Hongjun had had since his nightmare. The snow whipping past outside the little house seemed to glow faintly with the heart lamp’s warm, white light. Hongjun dreamed he was back in the hot springs at Mount Li. He and Li Jinglong stood naked in the warm water, and Li Jinglong was helping him apply medicine to his ear, their bare bodies

pressed against each other. Hongjun flushed and shied away, but Li Jinglong pulled him back.

“Just…like this.”

“And then like this—and this.”

“Hey, hey! Let go!”

The night they had stood hidden in an alleyway, waiting to catch the fox yao in the bustling Pingkang Ward, Li Jinglong had divulged to him with utmost seriousness the entire process of what occurred inside those brothels. His explanation had been so shocking Hongjun’s face had gone scarlet even as he felt his own arousal stir. Li Jinglong had said, *You strip naked, then wrap your arms around each other…*

The scenes Li Jinglong had described that night seemed to overlap with the image of the two of them plastered skin to skin in the hot spring. In the dream, Li Jinglong stroked a hand along the side of Hongjun’s neck, then lowered his head and kissed him. Hongjun’s heart raced as he held tight to Li Jinglong’s hand, just as it had tonight when Li Jinglong had stared into his eyes and made his promise.

Li Jinglong opened his hand, lacing their fingers together, and a wave of desire shivered through Hongjun.

Hongjun woke with a shudder and realized he’d come in his sleep. Li Jinglong was still unconscious, his fingers threaded through Hongjun’s own.

The snow outside had stopped. Hongjun flexed his knees, feeling the large wet spot on the crotch of his pants. Miserable with embarrassment, he carefully extricated his fingers from Li Jinglong’s. They had fallen asleep sitting slumped against each other. Half of Li Jinglong’s body must have gone numb from Hongjun resting on him like that, but luckily, he had yet to notice anything amiss.

What do I do?! My pants are wet! And I have no place to wash them!

Spotting his outer robe discarded to the side, he tugged the garment over and used a corner to wipe up the mess between his thighs.

Li Jinglong woke but made no sound as he opened his eyes a crack and watched Hongjun’s activity with curiosity. Hongjun hadn’t noticed his

audience. Cheeks scarlet, he crossed his legs, loosened his pants, and wiped himself clean with singular focus. Li Jinglong leaned over to take a look and promptly burst into laughter.

Hongjun yelped and punched Li Jinglong in the chest without thinking, nearly fracturing his bones.

An hour later, the pair rode through the snow-strewn field on the nearest official road that would take them back to the capital of Liang Prefecture. It was the second day of the new year, and the doorway of every household was littered with the remains of firecrackers, their red scraps like flowers blooming in the snow.

“You almost broke my ribs!” Li Jinglong groused.

Hongjun glanced back. “Stop talking about it!”

“So what was it?” Li Jinglong asked. “Did you dream about Gege?”

Hongjun ground his teeth; he sorely wished to beat this man to death.

Undeterred, Li Jinglong pressed, “That wasn’t your first time, was it?”

“It wasn’t!” Hongjun exploded. “I’ll ignore you if you keep going on about it!”

Li Jinglong followed him at a steady pace as they made their way into the prefectural capital. After they passed through the city gates, he left Hongjun outside while he entered a clothier to buy Hongjun a change of underwear before leading him to a bathhouse. It had been nearly half a month since Hongjun had bathed properly; he could finally have a soak and change into a fresh set of robes.

“Wait for me here when you’re done,” Li Jinglong said.

“Where are you going?” Hongjun asked blankly.

“I’m going to send a letter,” Li Jinglong explained. “I have to let the others know I found you.”

In the bathhouse, Hongjun sank into the water with a deep sigh. It really wasn’t his first time having an erotic dream. He’d had his first one years ago, when he was still living in Yaojin Palace. Thinking he had wet

his pants, he'd hidden them out of fear Chong Ming would scold him. It was only later that he learned what really happened.

What had he dreamed about back then? He'd heard someone calling out to him while he wrestled with a boy about his age. As they tussled, the other boy kissed him… Hongjun shook his head, dispelling his jumbled memories. Why had he dreamed about Li Jinglong last night? And in the hot springs too.

Hongjun felt himself harden again as he recalled the contents of that dream. He sank deeper into the bathtub, soaking dizzily. Only after he dumped a bucket of cold water over his head did his arousal subside.

He'd finished his bath, but Li Jinglong had yet to return. A bathhouse attendant set out several boxes of food in the room next door and told Hongjun the chief had said he should go ahead and eat. Hongjun tucked into his meal.

He waited into the afternoon, but there was still no sign of Li Jinglong. He suddenly felt abandoned—it was the second day of the new year, and the atmosphere in Liang Prefecture was festive. He was the only one in this strange city without any friends or acquaintances; even the carp yao had been left behind.

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, Hongjun peered outside—but it was only the bathhouse attendant.

Maybe I should just leave on my own. Hongjun was briefly tempted, but remembering Li Jinglong had spent a full day and night chasing him yesterday, he couldn't find it in himself to do it.

"Ahhhh—when will he be back?!" Hongjun was about to go crazy.

Li Jinglong chose that moment to walk around the folding screen. He stared at Hongjun in surprise. Li Jinglong had just finished bathing, and his hair was still damp. Lowering himself into a seat, he said, "I finally finished taking care of everything."

"Why didn't you tell me you were back?" Hongjun demanded.

Li Jinglong examined Hongjun's expression. "You're mad again?" he asked, then smiled as realization dawned. "You must have been waiting a long time. Why didn't you make yourself some tea?"

He placed the copper kettle on the portable stove and retrieved a food box of his own.

“I’m not going back to Chang’an,” Hongjun said petulantly.

“I know,” Li Jinglong responded. “We’ll leave for the Taihang Mountains in a bit.”

Hongjun looked at him in surprise. “You’re really coming with me?”

“Of course,” Li Jinglong answered, as if it had never been in question.

Hongjun studied Li Jinglong. He hadn’t thought about it much before, but after last night, he found there was something awfully attractive about Li Jinglong. His features were deep-set in a quintessentially Han manner, with swordlike brows and bright eyes, and he had a trim, muscular figure. His only defect was a habitual aloofness in his expression that made him appear over-serious. Except when he smiled at Hongjun, he was always like this; it was no wonder half the people he encountered had the urge to piss him off or beat him up.

When he finished eating, Li Jinglong made tea, pouring a cup for Hongjun first before sinking into a contemplative silence over his own. Recognizing that Li Jinglong was once again spinning a plan, Hongjun spoke up: “In that case, we have to lay some ground rules.”

Li Jinglong nearly spat out his tea. Casting Hongjun a considering look, he said, “Go on then.”

“When we arrive at Yaojin Palace, you have to do as I say,” Hongjun said.

“Well, of course,” Li Jinglong said. “As a guest in your home, it’s natural that I follow your lead. What else?”

After a moment of thought, Hongjun said, “That’s it.”

Li Jinglong was speechless.

“You left for so long today. Weren’t you worried I might leave without you?” Hongjun asked.

“I caught up to you once, so you won’t try running again.” Li Jinglong smiled as he poured another cup of tea. “You can’t bear to leave

me.”

His words tugged at Hongjun’s heartstrings, spreading a sour ache through his chest.

They finished their tea, and Li Jinglong paid their bill and led Hongjun out through the city gates. Hongjun had just mounted his horse when Li Jinglong climbed into the saddle behind him. “I told the others to head back to Chang’an and keep an eye out for the yao king’s movements,” he said. With no more explanation, he spurred the horse forward.

After a stunned silence, Hongjun protested, “I don’t want to ride with you! We each have a horse; why are you squishing into the saddle with me?!”

Li Jinglong snapped the reins, his firm chest pressed to Hongjun’s back. “Isn’t it nice not having to worry about the reins?”

Hongjun had grown accustomed to plastering himself to Li Jinglong and never found it strange before, but now, each time Li Jinglong leaned forward even slightly, the contact left Hongjun’s palms sweating.

Thankfully, their ride that afternoon was a short one. By the time they arrived at the relay station, the sky had grown dark. The villages and townships in the area retired to bed early during the New Year holiday, so after riding a few hours, Li Jinglong dismounted to procure them a room for the night.

As Hongjun led the horse to the stables, he heard Li Jinglong instructing the station attendant to prepare food and wine—it was the new year, and they ought to eat something delicious for dinner. Hongjun peeked at him from beyond the door, an inexplicable anxiety seizing his heart.

Li Jinglong finished making arrangements and turned to look for Hongjun. Spying him lingering at the door, he couldn’t help but laugh as he strode over.

“Why are you sneaking glances at me?” Li Jinglong asked, terribly amused. “What’s running through that little head of yours?”

All day as they were riding, Li Jinglong’s chest had pressed solidly against Hongjun’s back. The warmth that bled through his outer robe and

the powerful beat of his heart had given Hongjun an incredible feeling of safety, as if he'd found the place where he belonged.

Over the years, as he grew up, Hongjun had slowly come to accept the passing of his parents. The unbearable pain and hatred he felt upon waking from that nightmare stemmed not so much from their loss as from the shocking revelation that it was Li Jinglong who caused their deaths.

That night, Hongjun turned to observe Li Jinglong sleeping beside him. His handsome face was solemn in repose, his mouth soft and gently curved, his nose high and straight in profile, and his brows sharply defined. As he stared at him, Hongjun found himself hating him a little again. If not for that incident, perhaps he would still have his parents to rely on.

He flipped over to face the wall, his heart twisted in a painful knot.

The two of them set out again the next morning. After mounting his horse, Li Jinglong was about to offer Hongjun a hand up when Hongjun leapt onto his own steed and bolted into the distance.

Li Jinglong chased after him. "Where are you going so fast?" he called out.

Hongjun was plagued by a persistent anxiety as he cantered along the road with Li Jinglong by day, resting at roadside inns by night. Assuming his moodiness was nervousness at returning home, Li Jinglong repeatedly reassured him. Each evening, Li Jinglong sat at an inn's table drafting a letter to Chang'an while Hongjun perched on the corner of the bed with a book in his hands, sneaking glances at him. Li Jinglong noticed Hongjun staring from the corner of his eye but didn't pursue the matter.

Between their progress southward and the weather warming with the arrival of spring, the snow lining the road melted away as they rode. Li Jinglong made a point of taking a scenic route through the southern part of the Guanzhong region, and after nearly ten days of travel, greenery began to appear along the sides of the road.

On the twelfth day of the first month, they came upon the foot of the Taihang Mountains. Hongjun gazed up at the peaks and valleys and once again felt a wave of fear. He glanced back at Li Jinglong, who returned his gaze steadily, the picture of composure.

Hongjun was seized by an overpowering impulse to turn around and leave. He opened his mouth but couldn't seem to muster any words.

"I'll go with you," Li Jinglong said. "This is where the truth lies. Everyone has to face a moment like this at least once in their lives. Don't be afraid, Hongjun."

Li Jinglong's calm gaze bolstered Hongjun's confidence. "Have you faced such a moment before?" Hongjun asked, turning back to look at the highest peak of the Taihang Mountains. When Li Jinglong remained silent, he added, "When?"

He didn't answer, but Hongjun had already decided not to be afraid anymore. He spurred his horse forward, and Li Jinglong followed at a steady pace, a smile in his eyes.

Traveling north through the Taihang Mountains is a perilous trek; winding mountain paths render carriage wheels a wreck.[7]

Eight critical passes had crossed through the Taihang Mountains since ancient times, taking travelers straight into the clouds. By the end of their first day in the mountains, their warhorses were struggling just walking over the rocky roads. Many of the narrow military paths here had been abandoned, and a single misstep would send them tumbling off a sheer cliff.

Luckily, Jia Zhou had provided them with a pair of excellent steeds after Hongjun accidentally killed their prized Ferghana horses during his brief descent into demonhood. The animals were as intelligent as any human and managed to pick their way through despite the crumbling roads.

When night fell, they built a fire among the ruins of the pass, and during the day, they wove through thick mist, making their way toward the heart of the mountain range.

It was Li Jinglong's first time traveling in the Taihang Mountains. He had heard it said that this was a place beyond the reach of even monkeys and birds, but he still hadn't expected it to be this treacherous.

"How did you make your way down the Taihang Mountains the first time?" Li Jinglong asked.

The two of them were walking their horses slowly down the mountain path. The animals had begun to grow nervous. One horse trotted across a particularly precarious section of road, but the other refused to budge. Li Jinglong pushed the skittish creature from behind while Hongjun pulled the reins from the front, coaxing it to slowly shuffle forward.

“I walked down,” Hongjun answered.

“I was gonna say—” The rest was lost as Li Jinglong narrowly avoided a kick from the horse.

At last they cleared the dangerous stretch of path and reached a large, flourishing meadow where the earthly meridians converged. There was a hot spring on the meadow’s edge, so they bathed beneath the open sky and spent the night gazing at the stars.

As they bedded down for the night in the soft grass, Hongjun turned onto his side, pillowing his head on his arm and watching Li Jinglong. “Maybe you should wait for me here,” Hongjun said. “The road’s only going to get harder after this.”

“You’re underestimating me,” Li Jinglong said with a smile. “What if you don’t come back?”

Hongjun returned his smile, but a complicated feeling twisted in his chest. He flipped over so his back was to Li Jinglong, counting stalks of grass. Li Jinglong sat up and draped his cloak over the two of them before settling back down to sleep.

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Chapter 72:
The Summit of the Taihang Mountains

THE FIRST MONTH of the year drew to a close. Before they knew it, more than a month had gone by since they left Dunhuang.

As they made their way deeper into the Taihang Mountains, the unease gnawing at Hongjun's heart grew sharper and more insistent. At times he was seized by the urge to turn back with Li Jinglong, while at others he wished the road beneath their feet would never end. If only they were cut off from the rest of the world forever—then the many things he dreaded wouldn't happen, and there would be no need to agonize over them.

They left their horses in the meadow and continued on foot. Carefully skirting around a slot canyon, they followed the ancient road, winding their way toward the peaks. The sky above them was vast, and all was quiet save for the cries of the birds wheeling overhead.

When they ran out of rations, Hongjun settled down by a creek and taught Li Jinglong to fish. Hongjun would spear fish after fish with his throwing knives while Li Jinglong gathered them up and built a fire to roast their catch. There were more fruits and wild mushrooms in the forest than either of them could name. Hongjun had survived on these during his climb down from Yaojin Palace.

"It's that mountain over there." Hongjun pointed out a snowcapped peak in the distance.

They had almost reached their destination, though to Li Jinglong, nearly all the mountains looked the same. They prepared three days' worth of rations and set out on the final leg of the journey. Hongjun led them on a circuitous route through the forest, looking for the marks he had left behind the first time he made his way down until he reached a cliff face alongside the trees. From here, they would climb.

A place like Yaojin Palace could usually only be reached by birds. The wind howled in their ears as Hongjun and Li Jinglong edged, shoulder

to shoulder, up the mountainside. Li Jinglong had never scaled a mountain with only his bare hands, but Hongjun was used to clambering up and down such rugged terrain. He kept a tight grip on Li Jinglong's hand, afraid he might take a wrong step and go tumbling down the cliff.

After a treacherous vertical climb, they pulled themselves up onto a narrow ledge. Li Jinglong wiped the sweat from his forehead and followed Hongjun's gaze up. Hongjun tossed out his grappling hook, which caught on a boulder at the edge of a high cliff. He scaled the cliff face until he reached the next rocky shelf, then swung his grappling hook back down to pull Li Jinglong up behind him.

"You live all the way up here?!" Li Jinglong had assumed Hongjun's home was some ancient temple deep in the mountains; he hadn't expected there wasn't even a road.

"The view's amazing at the top!" Hongjun called. "Come on!"

Hongjun threw his grappling hook again, and the two scrambled up a section at a time with each toss. It occurred to Li Jinglong that this must have been how Hongjun learned to fly across rooftops and vault over walls.

As they ascended into the lowest clouds—the terrain beyond their heads covered in layers of ice accumulated over thousands of years—what footholds they found grew narrow, fitting only one person at a time. Hongjun and Li Jinglong stood practically on top of one another as they perched on a two-foot-wide protrusion to catch their breath.

The next time Hongjun swung his grappling hook, the ice above them gave way with a thunderous crash.

"Look out!" Li Jinglong wrapped Hongjun in his arms as the shelf of ice collapsed. Hongjun's heart thundered in his chest; they were pressed tightly together, nose-to-nose, as they gasped in panicked breaths.

The icefall missed them by inches, plummeting into the ravine below. Their breaths mingled as they stared at each other, listening for the echoes to fade for what seemed half an age. Hongjun could feel that both he and Li Jinglong had grown hard, Li Jinglong's arousal an overbearing heat shoved up against him. Li Jinglong studied him, his hands pressed to the mountain on either side of Hongjun and an impish gleam in his eyes.

“Is it nice, being held like this?” Li Jinglong was in a playful mood. “Be honest—have you actually liked Gege for a long time?”

Hongjun flushed scarlet and jerked back. “Don’t make fun of me!”

The instant Hongjun moved, Li Jinglong shouted, nearly plummeting to his death. Hongjun grabbed him as another layer of ice sheared off the face of the mountain overhead. Li Jinglong flung his arms around Hongjun, and they looked up as one. Several minutes later, after most of the ice had fallen, Hongjun cast his grappling hook out once more.

Qing Xiong had dropped Hongjun off at the bottom of this lonely peak when he first descended the mountain, but he had scaled the precipice a number of times in the past. By himself, he could climb up and down with ease, but it was much more difficult with Li Jinglong.

The sun was beginning to set in the west as Hongjun pulled himself up over the ledge of a cliff halfway up the mountain, where they could stop for some rest. He let down his grappling hook; Li Jinglong slipped several times on the swaying rope but finally managed to clamber up after Hongjun.

“It’ll be a lot easier now that we’ve made it this far,” Hongjun said. “We’re past the cloud cover, and there’s no snow at the peak. Let’s rest here for the night.”

Li Jinglong’s right hand was still shaking from his injury at the Mogao Caves. He sat heavily next to Hongjun on the ledge. A breeze drifted past, parting the sea of clouds and allowing the golden glow of sunset to scatter over them in countless beams of light. Looking westward, they could see the winding mountain ranges and vast plains of the Divine Land stretching for thousands of miles to the horizon.

“It’s so beautiful,” Li Jinglong murmured. “The climb was worth it.”

“When I was little,” Hongjun began, lost in thought, “my only wish was to leave the Taihang Mountains and go visit the human realm Qing Xiong always spoke of.”

“And what do you think of it?” Li Jinglong turned to look at Hongjun.

Hongjun's youthful visage was bright, his expression tinged with yearning. For a moment, Li Jinglong felt as if he was seeing Hongjun as he had been when they first met. He didn't know why Hongjun had grown increasingly withdrawn after leaving Chang'an, but now, watching the sunset spill over the land atop a high cliff, that pure and simple young man of the past seemed to return.

"The human realm is wonderful," Hongjun murmured. He turned to Li Jinglong with a smile.

Li Jinglong slung an arm over Hongjun's shoulders, bathed in the last rays of the dying sun. "Wonderful how?"

Hongjun considered this. "I don't know," he said finally.

"When I was little, I wanted to learn spiritual techniques and cultivate to immortality," Li Jinglong offered, his eyes going distant. "I wanted to fly away to a mountain unreachable by ordinary mortals and study as a pupil under a powerful sage. Yet you wanted to come to the land of mortals and see human society."

"Qing Xiong always said it's terribly dull in the mountains," Hongjun said, puzzled. "It's much more fun in the human realm. After you learned your techniques, you'd still go back to the human realm, wouldn't you? Why else would you cultivate to immortality? What's the point of living such a long life if you spend it all alone on a mountain?"

"Of course I'd go back—but not to show off my skills to ordinary humans," Li Jinglong amended with a laugh.

"Because you want to protect the country?" Hongjun asked. "But yao and demons haven't been running rampant through the human realm for very long—until recently, the Divine Land was at peace for decades. What made you believe in the contents of Di Renjie's book?"

Li Jinglong had answered a similar question a long time ago. Confronted with it again, however, he hesitated. His belief in the supernatural was something he had always felt sure of; no matter how others mocked him for what they perceived as baseless fears, he had never wavered.

But now that he thought about it, why *was* he so adamant?

“I suppose it was fate,” Li Jinglong said. “Otherwise, we would never have met.”

Hongjun hummed thoughtfully and leaned against his shoulder. The sun slipped beneath the horizon, and the stars rose into the sky. A strange calm settled over Hongjun, his worries momentarily dispelled.

When dawn broke, they began to climb once more.

This was the final and most arduous leg of their ascent. Their path ahead was made up of huge slabs of stone measuring dozens of yards in length; there were no obvious footholds, only slim cracks in the rocks. Each time he threw his grappling hook, it took Hongjun several attempts to catch its prongs in the fissures in the stone. They quickly developed a rhythm: Hongjun climbed up first, stabbed a throwing knife into the crack, and hung one-handed from the hilt as he pulled Li Jinglong up behind him. Once Li Jinglong grabbed hold of the knife wedged into the cliffside, Hongjun would repeat the process, climbing a few yards at a time.

The clouds cascaded around them. Li Jinglong clutched Hongjun’s throwing knife, his hand cramping with effort. “Hongjun… There’s just one thing I want to ask you…”

“What is it?” Hongjun peered down at him from above.

“We’re…climbing the right mountain, right?” Li Jinglong looked down. He gripped the throwing knife embedded into the side of a cliff with one hand, while beneath his feet, the undulating clouds parted to reveal the earth’s surface a thousand miles below.

A fall from such a height would reduce him to dust.

“There’s no way to climb down once we get to the top!” Li Jinglong shouted.

Hongjun hadn’t considered this question at all. Coming back to his senses, he said, “This should be the right one… I think?”

Li Jinglong nearly choked on air and fell to his death.

Clutching his throwing knife in one hand, Hongjun flung his grappling hook with the other, catching it on a platform at the top of the mountain. Pulling the rope taut, he swung out and clambered up the last stretch of cliff in a few quick hops. He let out a slow breath as he rose to his

feet atop the platform, only to start so badly in surprise he nearly tumbled back down the cliff.

Standing before him was a familiar figure. His fiery red robes hung loose from his shoulders and billowed in the wind, and the ends of his belt —one of which had been cut short—fluttered like phoenix feathers in the air. He regarded Hongjun with flashing golden eyes, his face a cold mask of indifference.

Chong Ming.

Hongjun stared at him, forgetting everything he'd wanted to say in an instant. Finally, and very quietly, he said, "Dad."

"Hongjun!" Li Jinglong shouted from below. "Are you okay?! Where are you?"

Snapping out of his trance, Hongjun hastily lowered his grappling hook and hauled Li Jinglong up. Li Jinglong was gasping for breath, his robes a mess of dust and sweat. Bracing a hand on Hongjun, he straightened up, only to freeze at the sight of Chong Ming.

"Chong…Uncle Chong Ming." Li Jinglong hastily cupped his hands in greeting.

"So you actually decided to come home?" Chong Ming's words were directed at Hongjun.

Hongjun stood there in silence. Chong Ming ran his eyes over the pair of them before turning away with a cold scoff.

Before Hongjun could run after him, a palace attendant approached and said quietly, "Your Highness. Please follow me."

"Dad! I have something to ask you!" Hongjun shouted after Chong Ming, ignoring the young man.

Chong Ming's footsteps paused. "You'll have your opportunity later," he said, his voice grim. With that, he shifted into phoenix form and took off for a distant hall with a beat of his great wings, rising in a blast of roaring flame.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong had managed to climb their way onto a platform just outside the main hall of Yaojin Palace, upon which lay a pond ringed with parasol trees. Li Jinglong gathered up the grappling hook as the

young attendant stepped forward to invite him to rest inside. Seeing Hongjun's despondent look, Li Jinglong said, "Hongjun, you should have a proper talk with your dad. Try not to argue with him."

Hongjun sighed and nodded.

In any case, it felt good to be home. He led Li Jinglong through the main hall and down a winding open-air corridor into the gardens. Li Jinglong peered around at the rare and exotic plants, many of which he'd never seen before. "Did you plant all of these?"

"I did, a long time ago." Hongjun thought for a moment. "Shall I give you a tour?"

"Let's wash up first," Li Jinglong said with a smile. "We're in no hurry."

Yaojin Palace was a sprawling complex spanning tens of thousands of acres. The palace attendants, who numbered nearly a thousand, were all young men and women who had cultivated into human form from various birds. The palace was built of precious white Hetian jade.

Hetian jade! Li Jinglong boggled at the sight. Daming Palace, Xingqing Palace, Huaqing Palace—these residences of the mortal emperor were lavish, but they couldn't hold a candle to the grandeur of this mountaintop perch.

The main body of the palace was split into an eastern, western, and central hall, with each subcomplex containing numerous winding corridors, carved balustrades, and painted roof ridges. These edifices had been built before the rise of the Han dynasty nearly a thousand years ago, and each hall was furnished with antiques that dated from the recent Sui dynasty back to dynasties so ancient they were more legend than history.

The attendant led Li Jinglong to the western hall, where the entrance was adorned with a crest similar to Hongjun's jade peacock feather. The cups set out were all fashioned from colored glass, and the rooms were decorated with gilt ornaments, delicate silk gauze, and bookshelves carved from rich red sandalwood.

"Chief Li." A young male attendant entered the room. "A bath has been prepared. Your clothes," he said, holding out a fresh set of robes.

Li Jinglong accepted the bundle and was surprised to find that in a mere quarter of an hour, the servants of Yaojin Palace had sewn him a new set of combat robes. They were identical to his own, save that they were made from a much higher quality silk brocade.

“I can bathe myself,” Li Jinglong said. Although he came from a large and wealthy family, he had never experienced such luxury in his life.

He bathed and changed into his new clothes. The young attendants of Yaojin Palace were all birds and wore only loose pants, leaving their torsos bare so they could spread their wings at will. In contrast, Li Jinglong had been provided a thin, sleeveless tunic cut from dark cloth and a pair of wooden clogs in addition to the navy-blue trousers of his combat robes. It was strange: Despite their soaring altitude, the top of the mountain was as warm as spring—likely due to the presence of a phoenix.

“Chief Li, please come with me.” The attendant beckoned him to follow once again.

Li Jinglong guessed it was Hongjun who told the attendants to address him as such. He nodded and followed in their footsteps, peering absently through the open doors of the rooms they passed. He spotted Hongjun’s library, a training room with straw targets fashioned in the shapes of grown men and pigs, and a workshop with a three-legged cauldron, a mortar and pestle, and other medical instruments.

Hongjun had just finished bathing as well, his hair freshly cut and dripping as he sat before a mirror. Unlike the Han people, yao had no rule proclaiming that one must not damage the hair, body, and skin bestowed on one by their parents, and his short hair lent him a quality of youthful energy. Upon returning to Yaojin Palace, he had changed into a pair of navy-blue silk trousers; as was his habit at home, he went without a shirt.

A young male attendant was mixing pigment and painting a dark blue pattern on the left side of his chest like a tattoo. Hongjun’s skin was exceedingly fair, and the well-defined muscles of his chest and abdomen were beautiful. With the addition of the pattern on his chest, he was a breathtaking sight.

“One of these days we should build a hot spring or something here too…”

Hongjun was talking to the attendants, but none of them said anything in response. He continued babbling on his own, recounting all the things he had seen below the mountains, and in particular, how comfortable soaking in the hot springs of Huaqing Palace had been. Perhaps afraid they would encourage him to wreak some new havoc if they joined his conversation, the young men all maintained a careful silence.

"There are also so many delicious things below the mountains," Hongjun continued. "We should have the cooks mix things up every now and then."

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Li Jinglong watched him through the mirror with a smile. Spotting him, Hongjun flushed. “We always dress like this here,” he explained. “Maybe I should go put on a tunic.”

Waving a hand in dismissal, Li Jinglong silently looked Hongjun up and down. Hongjun grew nervous under his inspection, yet he also felt an inexplicable thrill of excitement. “What are you looking at?”

“You’re beautiful,” Li Jinglong replied.

The youths of Yaojin Palace were all handsome, but none could compare to Hongjun, whose countenance seemed to exude a natural brightness and purity.

The attendant extended the feather pattern over Hongjun’s left shoulder and chest, then presented a jade pendant for him to wear around his neck. Another attendant arrived to announce that His Majesty invited them to partake of a meal.

The sun had begun to set in the west. Assuming Hongjun would want to spend time with Chong Ming since he had just gotten home, Li Jinglong told Hongjun there was no need for Hongjun to keep him company and returned to his room for his own meal.

To his surprise, Hongjun soon came hurrying back. “I don’t know where Chong Ming’s gone,” he said. “I’ll eat with you.”

The attendants served their food—a bowl of strange-looking rice, fish and tofu soup, eggs stir-fried with leafy greens, and a small portion of meat.

Seeing Li Jinglong’s expression, Hongjun guessed what he was thinking. “My dad didn’t lay these. They’re chicken eggs.”

There was a brief silence. Li Jinglong asked, “Can *you* lay eggs?”

“I might be a yaoguai, but I’m still male!” Hongjun said, torn between laughter and tears. “Only females lay eggs!”

“It would be fun, having a little kid like you,” Li Jinglong teased.

Hongjun gestured for Li Jinglong to stop talking and eat. They were both famished, but their bowls weren’t filled with ordinary steamed rice. The grains were fragrant, but their texture was unexpectedly coarse.

“This rice is still so hard to chew.” Hongjun cocked his head to the side as he choked down a mouthful.

Li Jinglong hastily filled his soup bowl before taking a bite of his own meal. “Isn’t this bamboo rice?!” he asked in surprise.

Hongjun had no idea how valuable bamboo rice was. Li Jinglong marveled. Only a phoenix would use steamed bamboo rice as a staple food—and only this family would make such a rare delicacy so unpalatable.

“What kind of meat is this?”

“Rabbit,” Hongjun said. “Caught at the foot of the mountain.”

As Li Jinglong ate, he realized why Hongjun had been like a hungry ghost upon leaving the mountains, never satiated no matter how much he ate. The food at Yaojin Palace was remarkably bland. The cooks used no oil or salt; even the rabbit and mushroom stir-fry was cooked over low heat, with only the fat from the rabbit itself and no other seasonings or sauces to flavor the dish.

“Rabbits are so cute,” Hongjun said. “How did they manage to make them so unappetizing? Such a waste.”

Li Jinglong chewed in silence.

The attendants listened to Hongjun’s complaints but made no comment. After a few more half-hearted bites, Hongjun set down his chopsticks and asked, “Have you guys eaten yet?”

The attendants finally responded, answering that they had. Hongjun dismissed them for the evening. Li Jinglong said he didn’t need anything either, so the birds spread their wings and dispersed.

“Zhao Zilong didn’t come back with you,” Li Jinglong noted.

“It’s just as well. If he were here, he’d definitely get yelled at,” Hongjun said as he flipped through the cabinets, digging up half a bag of bamboo leaf green tea, which he dumped into colored glass cups and steeped in boiling water. He handed a steaming cup to Li Jinglong, and they settled beneath the eaves of an open-air corridor to gaze at the moon. It was full that evening, its brilliant white face cresting the peaks of the Taihang Mountains. Yaojin Palace seemed like a summertime paradise in the gentle breeze.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Li Jinglong said.

“The time goes by quickly too,” Hongjun responded quietly. He’d been reluctant to return home, but now that he was back, he almost couldn’t bear the thought of leaving again.

“How do you usually spend your time at home?” Li Jinglong asked. “Did Chong Ming teach you your spiritual techniques?”

“I read and cause trouble,” Hongjun said. “Chong Ming likes to nap in the main hall. When Qing Xiong comes, he’ll usually play with me for a few days.”

“There are so many birds here—aren’t any of them your friends?”

“They don’t really talk,” Hongjun said. “It’s not that they don’t know how, but…they’ve only cultivated for a couple decades. They can take human form thanks to my dad sharing his spiritual energy, but they haven’t acquired a high level of sentience yet. They can help with simple tasks, but they’re not clever like those fox yao we met. They’ll only repeat whatever you teach them to say. The adversaries we’ve encountered so far have all been extremely powerful yaoguai. The ghost king was originally human, so he doesn’t have to engage in spiritual cultivation, but the plague god and the dark lady have cultivated for two or three hundred years. It’s just that their malign energy has yet to fade.”

“Didn’t Zhao Zilong talk to you?” Li Jinglong asked again.

“He was always afraid of getting yelled at for egging me on when I got into trouble.” Hongjun laughed. “My dad said he would roast him over a spit if he kept leading me astray.”

Thinking back to the gold- and jade-encrusted palace he had passed through on his way in, Li Jinglong could almost see little Hongjun running back and forth between the rooms.

Hongjun set down his cup, the deep green tea reflecting the bright disk of the moon. A light breeze wended past, and the wind chimes beneath the eaves jingled.

“Thank you for coming home with me, Chief,” Hongjun said. He rose and walked back down the corridor without another word, the moon bathing his naked torso in pale light.

Still looking into his cup, Li Jinglong called out, “Hongjun.”

Hongjun paused at the end of the corridor and looked back at Li Jinglong’s seated figure.

Li Jinglong was silent for a long time. He appeared nervous, rotating the cup between his long and slender fingers, a miniature moon reflected in his tea.

“Will you come back to Chang’an with me?” Li Jinglong asked with a mournful smile. “I feel like now that you’ve come home, you won’t leave this place again.”

“I will,” Hongjun said without thinking.

Before Li Jinglong could glance up at him, Hongjun turned the corner and disappeared. He passed those familiar parasol trees, and when he reached the wall that he’d so often stood before during his punishments, he couldn’t help but stop and stare at it in a daze. His heart thudded in his chest; he suddenly had no idea what to do. Why had he blurted out those words?

“Your Highness,” an attendant, yet another young man, said as he approached. “His Majesty requests your presence.”

Hongjun took off for the main hall at a run.

The main hall, once set ablaze thanks to Hongjun’s antics, had been rebuilt; it looked no different than before. Beyond the stone pillars at the front of the hall stood a dais, its three thrones—as empty as ever—cast in moonlight. Outside, a pond graced the platform facing the mountains, beside which stood another parasol tree. It was here, sitting beneath the tree, that he found Chong Ming.

Hongjun slowly came to a stop in the tree’s shadow. When he was little, Chong Ming had often sat against the parasol tree by the pond just like this, and Hongjun had lain against his bare chest and slept the whole night.

He hadn’t changed a whit; it was as if Chong Ming was immune to the passage of time.

“Whatever it is that you wish to ask, go ahead and ask it,” Chong Ming said, his voice low.

Standing behind Chong Ming, Hongjun said quietly, “I know the truth about my parents’ deaths.”

“Good,” Chong Ming said. “Then you have lived up to our expectations.”

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Chapter 73:
The Bitter Truth

CHONG MING waited a few beats. When Hongjun did not respond, he continued, “Tell me. What happened?”

“Don’t you know better than anyone?” Hongjun asked. “You wanted to remove the demon seed of Mara from my dad’s body, so you sent him to the human realm to find a woman, who gave birth to me—didn’t you?”

Hongjun’s voice was shaking by the time he finished speaking. Chong Ming’s eyes widened. He’d anticipated a detailed report of how Hongjun uncovered the truth about his father’s death; he never expected him to bring up the circumstances of his own birth.

“Who told you?” Chong Ming’s tone hardened.

“You did, didn’t you?” Hongjun gasped harshly. “Answer me!”

“Impudence!” Chong Ming surged to his feet, his aura flaring, forcing Hongjun to take a step back. “If I hadn’t done so, you wouldn’t even exist!”

Chong Ming’s response confirmed all of Hongjun’s suspicions. The feverish anxiety and fear that had plagued him the whole way home erupted at last. Unable to suppress his anger, he shouted, “You got my mom killed! What am I?! *What am I?!* Answer me!”

“You are Kong Xuan’s son,” Chong Ming said coldly.

“I’m just a sacrifice.” Hongjun backed away, shaking from head to toe. “I’m just—a sacrifice you guys created to extract the demon seed.”

“That’s right,” Chong Ming said calmly, meeting Hongjun’s eyes. “If not for your father’s death, you would have never had the opportunity to stand before me.”

Hongjun struggled for breath; the world seemed to spin around him.

“The day Qing Xiong brought you to Yaojin Palace, I didn’t want to spare your life,” Chong Ming said, studying his face. When Hongjun made

no response, he continued, “But I have a guilty conscience. Kong Xuan died because of me—so I allowed you to stay.”

“No… No…” Hongjun stared at Chong Ming, his eyes wild.

“Is this not what you know in your heart to be true?” Chong Ming asked, his voice frigid. “Is this not the reality you most fear—what your heart has told you all along? I don’t care what your mother was, and I care even less what you are. The fact that my useless brother Kong Xuan would sacrifice himself to protect you—that is the only thing of any consequence to me.

“Qing Xiong, your father, and I—yes, *we* killed your mother!” Chong Ming exploded in fury. “But it is only because of us that you entered this world! You ought to be thanking us—yet you dare stand here and condemn me instead?!”

A chill ran up Hongjun’s spine, icy fingers crawling across his scalp. “Then why…why did you take me in and care for me?!”

It felt like his soul was shattering. Hongjun ruthlessly gave voice to all the questions he hadn’t dared think about, digging out the truth with each sentence spoken, as if tearing all his memories of Yaojin Palace to pieces before his own eyes.

Chong Ming sneered. “Xie Yu wanted to devour you and become a demonic dragon to rule the Divine Land—how could I possibly allow him to do as he pleases?!”

“No.” Hongjun’s voice shook. “That’s not true…” He stumbled back another step and made to flee.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Chong Ming asked icily. “I gave you a choice—you’re the one who chose to come back!”

Innumerable rays of copper light erupted from Chong Ming’s hands, coiling themselves around Hongjun’s body. “Let me go!” he shouted furiously.

Chong Ming clamped a hand around Hongjun’s throat and shoved him into a corner of the hall, his eyes flaring gold. “I should have dealt with you long ago,” he said, his voice deepening into a divine clap of thunder. “It would have saved me a world of trouble.”

They were the last words Hongjun heard before he lost consciousness, darkness swallowing him in an instant.

Chong Ming kept watch over Hongjun's curled-up body in the corner of the hall until the sun began to rise. He turned to see a great peng, draped in golden light, soaring through the mountains and gliding toward him.

The light of dawn emerged through mountains shrouded in mist. Li Jinglong awoke to the musical trills of birdsong and stumbled groggily out of his room to find Yaojin Palace made soft-edged by fog, the parasol trees transforming into a sea of clouds—a sight like nothing he'd ever seen.

Chong Ming stepped out from the grove of parasol trees, the songs of a hundred birds paying homage to their king rising behind him.

"Mortal, we must speak with you," Chong Ming said, his voice carrying across the palace grounds.

Li Jinglong rushed into his room to change his robes before stepping back out. He felt inexplicably nervous—not because of Chong Ming's great eminence, but because he was Hongjun's adoptive father.

The mist thinned, revealing Chong Ming and Qing Xiong standing among the trees. Qing Xiong had once taught Li Jinglong a set of boxing techniques—a favor Li Jinglong hadn't forgotten. He cupped his hands and bowed respectfully in greeting.

When he raised his head to study Chong Ming, he caught a flicker of anger on the sage-king's face. Qing Xiong's expression was likewise dour. Noting Hongjun's absence, Li Jinglong was overcome by an ominous feeling.

Chong Ming looked Li Jinglong up and down, then said grimly, "The heart lamp was never meant for you."

Li Jinglong felt a spike of alarm, but his mind reacted faster than Chong Ming could speak. "The sole heir of the Chen family is yet a child ungrown," Li Jinglong retorted. "How can he possibly accept the burden of the heart lamp? You need the heart lamp to dispel the demonic energy within Hongjun—what harm is there in leaving it with me for the time being?"

Chong Ming hadn’t expected Li Jinglong to contradict him. The atmosphere promptly turned awkward.

“The day I die, I will return it as a matter of course,” Li Jinglong said evenly, shifting his gaze to Qing Xiong.

Qing Xiong glanced at Chong Ming, who said, chilly, “That will not be necessary. Leave the mountain—now. Henceforth, you will have nothing to do with Yaojin Palace.”

Li Jinglong cursed under his breath; he hadn’t expected Chong Ming would order him to leave outright.

“Where’s Hongjun?” Li Jinglong asked at once. “I want to see him. Let me see him before I go.”

“Do not test me.” Chong Ming’s voice took on a menacing edge. “This is not your mortal capital of Chang’an. You are no more than a single ant out of a billion of your kind. Do not imagine you can defy us because of a useless sword you picked out of a trash heap!”

Chong Ming didn’t move, but his aura exploded outward, flames igniting around him. Li Jinglong instinctively backed away, activating the heart lamp as he reached behind him with his right hand.

With a *thrum*, the Sword of Wisdom sensed his summons and shot through the window into his hand just as the raging fire reached him. He deflected the flames with his blade, but the searing wall of heat slammed into the Sword of Wisdom like the strike of a meteor. Before he could react, his weapon was struck from his hand. The heart lamp was like a paper lampshade before the onslaught, burned up in an instant.

“Go easy on him!” Qing Xiong shouted.

Li Jinglong felt a dull ache in his chest as he was knocked off of his feet, landing hard in the open-air corridor. He lay for a moment in a wretched heap before struggling onto his hands and knees.

Chong Ming stared at Li Jinglong in silence. Gasping for breath, Li Jinglong finally understood the vast gulf between their levels of cultivation. There was nothing he could do to fight back.

“Get the hell off my mountain,” Chong Ming said. “Hongjun has already told you what happened in the past. He will not see you again.”

Li Jinglong raised his head, but Chong Ming was already striding past him and out of the garden.

Qing Xiong gazed down at Li Jinglong and sighed. “Go,” he said. “Go back to Chang’an and your job as an exorcist.”

Li Jinglong stared up in a daze, only to see Qing Xiong lift a hand. Li Jinglong’s surroundings began to glow and melt away—

With a flash of white light, he found himself standing at the foot of the mountain nearly a hundred miles away. The Sword of Wisdom spun in a wide arc through the air and plunged blade-first into the ground with a metallic *clang*.

Li Jinglong stared at the sword, unable to say a word.

High above in Yaojin Palace, Chong Ming sat on his throne in silence.

Qing Xiong paced across the throne room, studying Chong Ming. “It didn’t have to be like this.”

“It didn’t have to be like this?” Chong Ming asked quietly. “You were the one who insisted he leave the mountains. ‘He who ties the bell to the tiger must be the one to untie it,’ you said. Now, not only has the demonic energy in him not been dispelled, it’s grown stronger! He’s come back to Yaojin Palace reeking of malign energy!”

“You can’t keep him in the dark forever,” Qing Xiong protested.

Chong Ming was incandescent with rage. “Who was it that vouched for that human, saying he would be able to suppress the demon seed in Hongjun?! He can’t even handle one of my attacks—he’s completely useless!”

“Who would have expected you to use the true phoenix fire against him!” Qing Xiong’s anger flared in answer. “Don’t you understand?! The light of the heart lamp is a method of deliverance, not a tool for slaughter!”

“I won’t allow Hongjun to take a single step out of Yaojin Palace again!”

Qing Xiong strode forward, refusing to relent. “The black jiao has split its soul to create a substitute for the demon seed. We have no idea how many of these false demon seeds are out there! Do you really think if you shelter Hongjun here in Yaojin Palace, Mara won’t be resurrected?!”

“Why should I care whether Mara is resurrected or not?” Chong Ming rose and descended the dais, coming to stand nose-to-nose with Qing Xiong, his eyes frigid with indifference.

“Dage, are you looking for a fight?” Qing Xiong broke into a smile as he looked Chong Ming up and down. “It’s been years—shall we step outside?”

Chong Ming merely shoved Qing Xiong aside, forcing him to take a few steps back. “How much remorse must I express to atone for a wrong committed in a momentary lapse of judgment? The day of Mara’s resurrection will be the day of my demise. Perhaps this is the only way I can make things right with all of you—and with Kong Xuan.”

Qing Xiong lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Just as he was about to take his leave, Chong Ming spoke once more.

“Seal his memory,” he said, his voice leaden as he stared at the mountains in the distance. “Keep him here in Yaojin Palace. Once I am gone, entrust this place to his care. My only worry now is that he’ll feel lonely, sitting in this hall by himself.”

“I’ll do my best,” Qing Xiong said with a sigh. “The demon seed is aggressive, and Hongjun has experienced too much after leaving the mountain. I fear it will be impossible to seal his memory now.”

“Let him continue to hate me, then,” Chong Ming said.

When Hongjun woke up, he found himself alone atop an isolated peak, confined within a pavilion less than ten yards in diameter. Someone had set out food and water, and a thin chain had been fastened around his left ankle, which clinked with his every move. His pentacolor sacred light and immortal-slaying knives were nowhere to be found; when he tried to summon fire with his spiritual techniques, his back flared with pain.

Grabbing the cup of water, he dumped its contents on the ground and turned to look at his back in the water's reflection. Between his bare shoulders, drawn in cinnabar and powdered gold, sat a phoenix sigil. The instant he activated the spiritual power in his meridians, the sigil flared and suppressed his spiritual technique.

He twisted a hand back to scrub it off, but the sigil was located squarely in the middle of his back. No matter how he stretched his arms, he couldn't reach it. Staggering over to one of the pavilion's pillars, he turned and scraped his back against the rough surface until his skin chafed and burned, but still, the sigil wouldn't budge.

"Dad…"

Helpless, Hongjun had instinctively called for Chong Ming, only to realize his jailer could be none other than Chong Ming himself.

Dragging the chain behind him, he gazed out from his lonely peak at the tiny black dot in the distance that was Yaojin Palace, bobbing in the sea of clouds below. The rocky spire on which he stood was sheer on all sides and nearly as high as the peak that held Yaojin Palace. Even without the chain around his ankle, he had no way to escape. If he tried to jump down, he would be smashed to paste.

"Li Jinglong!" Hongjun shouted in the direction of Yaojin Palace.

There was no response. Hongjun put his back to the pillar and slid down weakly.

At dusk, Li Jinglong washed his face in a creek, then paused to examine his reflection.

Though it was early spring, the snow had yet to melt in the Taihang Mountains, and now, a chilly rain had begun to fall. Li Jinglong took a sip of water and ate some dry rations to replenish his strength. Lifting his head, he tried to discern between the nearly identical row of peaks in the distance.

He slung the Sword of Wisdom across his back and tramped down a narrow, bramble-covered mountain path. His eye snagged on a bird sitting atop a tree looking this way and that, its black eyes fixed on him. The bird

hopped over a branch, then swooped toward another tree as several more birds took off and disappeared into the forest with a flutter of wings.

Li Jinglong sighed in relief. Having identified the path he and Hongjun had taken on their way up the mountain, he struck out once more for the cliffs lining the ravine.

Chong Ming stood before the pond in the middle of Yaojin Palace, watching the image reflected in the water with Qing Xiong.

“That’s all that human is capable of,” Chong Ming said coldly before turning to leave.

Qing Xiong watched him go. He shook out gold-limned wings, transforming into a great peng and soaring into the air. After wheeling once above the palace, he turned westward.

In his mountaintop pavilion, Hongjun looked up as he heard a bird’s piercing cry. “Qing Xiong! Qing Xiong—!”

The golden-winged great peng swooped down. His head was more than thirty feet in length, and his outspread wings easily shrouded the pavilion in shadow. Hongjun yanked on the iron chain as a fierce wind buffeted him. Worried the great peng couldn’t see him, he yelled, “I’m over here!”

With a brilliant flash of light, the great bird shrank, shifting back into Qing Xiong’s imposing figure. He alighted on the pavilion’s railing and crouched low, gazing at Hongjun with what could only be described as pity.

“Let me out of here!” Hongjun cried. “Qing Xiong!”

Qing Xiong looked at him in silence. Hongjun’s heart sank as he realized he must have already spoken to Chong Ming. “Chong Ming told you everything?”

He nodded and reached out to gently cup Hongjun’s cheek. “You must have suffered a lot in the human realm,” he said, his voice strangely calm.

Hongjun stared blankly at him for a moment before shaking his head. Qing Xiong sat down on the railing, hands on his knees as he continued to study Hongjun’s face.

Stepping back, Hongjun leaned against the opposite railing and let out a weary sigh. “It’s just as you said—the human realm is wonderful. But the things that make it wonderful are different from what you told me.”

“I think the human realm is wonderful because of the people there,” Qing Xiong said. “By comparison, Yaojin Palace is like a cage. Now you know why I’m always reluctant to come back.”

Hongjun recalled last night when Li Jinglong asked him if he would follow him back to Chang’an, and how he’d said yes without thinking. “Mm.” Hongjun nodded.

Qing Xiong sighed again. “Chong Ming has been alone too long. Please don’t hate him.”

“Where’s Li Jinglong?”

“He left,” Qing Xiong responded. “We told him not to wait for you and to go back to Chang’an.”

Hongjun’s head shot up.

“Do you regret going to the human realm?” Qing Xiong asked.

“No. I don’t.”

A breeze swirled past, and the clouds parted, revealing the Divine Land below in the rays of the setting sun.

“Hongjun,” Qing Xiong began quietly, “you know the truth better than anyone, don’t you?”

“Did Li Jinglong and I know each other as kids?” Hongjun asked in lieu of answering.

Qing Xiong examined Hongjun’s face. What seemed minutes later, he nodded reluctantly.

They took turns asking questions, oftentimes understanding each other’s responses without having to speak aloud. Hongjun obtained answers to nearly all of his questions. With each one, his hopes were slowly ground to dust.

“Qing Xiong,” Hongjun asked at last, perfectly calm. “It was you who sealed my memory back then, wasn’t it?”

Li Jinglong, Di Renjie, the abandoned Department of Exorcism… In the nightmare he had of his family's murder, the first one to arrive on the scene had been Qing Xiong. Hongjun could vaguely recall Qing Xiong falling to one knee, staring into his eyes as he spoke a handful of words before pressing a hand to his brow. In a flash of white light, he had forgotten all the pain he had suffered in the past.

"It was," Qing Xiong admitted, no longer hiding the truth. "It was me who sealed both your and Li Jinglong's memories. I didn't want you to live with that pain. The heart lamp was given to me by the divine kun. He told me then that whoever ties the bell to the tiger must be the one to untie it. I had a feeling you might run into Li Jinglong when you returned to Chang'an. But I didn't expect the heart lamp to accidentally enter his body."

"You also didn't expect your seal on my memories to fade," Hongjun guessed.

"An unforeseen turn of events," Qing Xiong murmured absently. "The seal is an incantation—a line from a poem I taught you as a child. The words were of utmost importance, but after inhaling oblivion pollen, you forgot them, and your memories gradually began to surface."

Hongjun listened in silence, the rims of his eyes reddening as he stared at Qing Xiong.

"Why not forget all that?" Qing Xiong said. "Stay here in Yaojin Palace. The lives of mortals are filled with suffering."

Hongjun's breath hitched as Qing Xiong raised his left hand, his palm glowing with a gentle white light. "Wait…" Hongjun's voice shook. "There's one more thing I want to ask you, Qing Xiong."

As Qing Xiong watched, Hongjun began to tremble all over. "There's no way you just happened to rescue me at the very last moment. Why didn't you come a little sooner? You knew what was going to happen, didn't you? You wanted to wait…for them to kill me…before taking my dad back to Yaojin Palace. Isn't that right?"

Tears coursing down his face, Qing Xiong turned aside, avoiding Hongjun's gaze. "Hongjun…I'm sorry," he said, his voice choked with remorse.

This last answer was finally too much; the fury and sorrow in Hongjun's heart surged up like a flood breaking through an embankment, overwhelming. But Qing Xiong had already pressed his palm over Hongjun's eyes. "The living are but transient guests; the dead are trav'lers homeward bound; alas, the world is just an inn; everything dust in the wind[8]… *Seal!*"

Images flashed through Hongjun's mind:

"What does it mean?" a young Hongjun asked.

"It's an incantation," Qing Xiong explained. "You must never forget it."

The stars over the precipice gleamed like jade disks as Qing Xiong reclined on the slab of stone, a smaller Hongjun resting against his chest. Together, they gazed up at the glittering vault of heaven.

"When malign energies overwhelm the heavenly and earthly meridians, they disperse into the human realm and coalesce into demons," Qing Xiong explained.

"What are malign energies?" Hongjun asked again.

"The consequence of obsession."

"What is obsession?"

"Thousands of obsessions are born of life and death," Qing Xiong murmured. "Whether yao or human, the souls of all living things are merely transient guests hurrying through this vast world. To be born, to grow old, to get sick and pass on; the seven emotions and six desires—these are all no more than fleeting scenes slipping by along the road of life. Once you understand the true nature of life and death, you will be bound by no obsession and thus be free of inner demons. And with no inner demons, the heavenly demon Mara will not appear—understand?"

"I understand," Hongjun said automatically. He flipped over, laying his cheek on Qing Xiong's chest and closing his eyes in sleep.

Atop that lonely spire, Qing Xiong blotted out the sky with a thunderous beat of his wings. White light swirled around him in a powerful current as Hongjun screamed in pain.

“Let go of me!” Hongjun struggled fiercely, but the light in Qing Xiong’s palm glowed brighter, rushing into Hongjun’s brow, through his bare chest and abdomen and into the rest of his body in an endless stream.

Hongjun clawed at Qing Xiong’s wrist. “*All of you lied to me—*”

His voice turned hoarse and strange. Black energy spewed from his eyes and black wings sprouted from his back. The dark energy slammed into Qing Xiong like a wall. Struggling to withstand the onslaught, he bellowed, “I said, *seal*!”

Sensing Hongjun on the verge of breaking through Qing Xiong’s seal, the phoenix sigil on Hongjun’s back flared with light.

In Yaojin Palace’s main hall, Chong Ming’s eyes flew open.

On the isolated spire, the pillars of the pavilion collapsed as Hongjun’s demonic energy collided with Qing Xiong, roof tiles flying in all directions. Dark mist curled up Qing Xiong’s arm, spreading toward his neck as it stabbed into his body like crisscrossing thistles and thorns, spilling his golden blood across the platform.

“*I’ll kill you!*” Hongjun screamed in that eerie voice, his eyes filled with tongues of blazing black fire.

A stream of golden flames blasted toward him from behind, dispersing to reveal a phoenix in flight. Chong Ming spread his massive wings with a piercing cry and shouted, “Break!”

He clasped his hands, gathering his phoenix fire around Hongjun and covering him with tens of thousands of flaming feathers. They formed a massive fireball, forcing the demonic energy back into his body. With a deep rumble, the pavilion came crumbling down as Hongjun collapsed in a dead faint.

Qing Xiong gasped harshly. Chong Ming dropped to one knee and pressed a hand to the sigil on Hongjun’s back. “The demon seed was not so violent before,” he said grimly. “We cannot allow him to return to the human realm again.”

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Chapter 74:
Perilous Peaks

As evening fell, Li Jinglong quietly stepped out of the bushes, the Sword of Wisdom strapped across his back. He sprinted across a stream as swift as a panther.

Bright, bloody clouds erupted above a distant mountain, accompanied by the roll of thunder. Li Jinglong looked toward a peak in the east—the mountain he had scaled with Hongjun last time, atop which sat Yaojin Palace.

Night had come to the Taihang Mountains. The birds had gone to roost, and the world seemed to undergo a subtle transformation. One could only guess what vicious monsters hid in the darkness. Li Jinglong held his breath and listened carefully to each susurration on the wind as he drew steadily closer to the mountains in the distance.

Li Jinglong still had Hongjun's grappling hook, which he had gathered up after climbing up to Yaojin Palace the first time. He gazed up at the cliff face and took a deep breath. It was a dark and cloudy night, so no birds should take notice of him.

It's now or never!

He swung the grappling hook a few times, recalling Hongjun's easy movements, and tossed the hook upward. The prongs caught in a protruding tree with a soft *thunk*, and Li Jinglong began his climb.

"He's taken in a lot of malign energy," Qing Xiong said, sprawled on the steps before Yaojin Palace's main hall in exhaustion. Chong Ming stood behind him, pouring a jar of medicinal wine over his wounds. Qing Xiong endured the sting and gazed up at Chong Ming.

"If you had listened to me instead of sending him down the mountain," Chong Ming said in wintry tones, "we wouldn't be in this predicament."

Qing Xiong let out a bitter laugh.

Chong Ming tossed the wine jar down, and the vessel shattered on the steps. “When can you make another attempt?”

“Tomorrow at dawn,” Qing Xiong responded. “I’ll perform the incantation again then. It should be enough to seal him.”

Stalking into the hall, Chong Ming stopped before the couch where Hongjun lay unconscious. Hongjun’s face looked completely relaxed in sleep, no different from usual. Chong Ming scooped him up, cradling him against his chest before venturing through the hall into the courtyard, where he set him gently beneath the parasol tree.

He leaned against the tree’s trunk and gazed out at the horizon in silence. Hongjun slumbered beside him, the chain on his ankle connected to a bracelet on Chong Ming’s wrist.

Beneath the bright moon, the myriad peaks of the Taihang Mountains were like isolated islands in a sea of silvered clouds. Hongjun dreamed, sinking into memory.

“Dad, what are you looking at?”

“The sun.”

“It hasn’t risen yet.”

“It will soon,” Chong Ming responded, his voice low.

In Hongjun’s memory, Chong Ming was always sitting in silence. If he wasn’t sleeping, then he was staring absently into the distance. Hongjun had once touched the tattoo-like scar reaching up the side of Chong Ming’s neck and asked him how he got it. Chong Ming had merely replied that he was bitten by a snake.

On this night, the young Hongjun settled down beside Chong Ming and watched as the eastern sky gradually paled to a fish-belly white. He had woken in the middle of the night from a dream. After looking everywhere for Chong Ming, he had finally found him on this platform.

“Dad, what are you looking at?” little Hongjun asked curiously as he ran across the platform and peeked out from behind a pillar.

“The moonlight.”

“Dad, can I go to the human realm?”

“No.”

“But Qing Xiong said he’d take me…”

It was the angriest Hongjun had ever seen Chong Ming. His simple question had sparked a furious argument between Chong Ming and Qing Xiong. In the end, Qing Xiong had winged away, leaving Hongjun staring after him in puzzlement. It had taken three months of apologies from Hongjun before Chong Ming stopped cruelly ignoring him.

After that, he hadn’t dared mention the mortal realm in Chong Ming’s presence again—though he waited anxiously for Qing Xiong’s visits. Chong Ming’s anger gradually subsided. Eventually, he said, “It’s natural for a fledgling to leave the nest. But as with many things in life, you cannot have the best of both worlds. You may go to the human realm if you wish, but if you go, you may never return.”

“Dad, look, I saved a fish…” Hongjun was much older now and had begun to resemble Kong Xuan more by the day.

“What is that hideous thing?! Throw it out!”

“Dad! I’ll raise it properly!”

The carp yao ducked behind him, shivering in fear. “Mister Savior, maybe you should just forget it…”

“Don’t worry.” Hongjun turned to the carp yao. “My dad just looks scary.”

Chong Ming was speechless.

Hongjun’s memories swirled again.

“Will you choose your world of mortals? Or will you choose me?”

“Dad, I can’t bear to lose you. If you’re making me choose…”

But Chong Ming had already folded his fingers in a sword seal, fire bursting from his fingertips as he slashed them toward the long plumes hanging from his belt.

The belt split in two with a sizzle. Chong Ming turned and leaned back, letting himself fall over the edge of the cliff. Flames erupted around him as he hung in midair, illuminating the last hours of night, and shook out

his feathers, transforming into the luminous form of a true phoenix. His cry echoed through the mountains, and with a gentle beat of his wings, he soared into the sky without a backward glance.

"Dad!" Hongjun screamed wildly as he caught the severed plume, dashing after Chong Ming. Li Jinglong grabbed him, dragging him back from the cliff's edge.

Li Jinglong held him tight as they watched Chong Ming fly into the distance.

That night, as Hongjun slept, his arm had dangled over the edge of the bed; Li Jinglong fell asleep holding his hand. In his dream, the leaves of the parasol tree in the Department of Exorcism rustled, cutting the sunlight into dappled shadows like a meteor shower falling from the sky.

"Chief…"

"Chief, what are you doing?"

"Chief? What is this?"

"Kong Hongjun! We're in public—don't cling to me like that!"

In the pitch-dark night, an icy rain began to fall. Holding a makeshift wooden piton between his teeth, Li Jinglong dragged himself up a stretch of cliff. He didn't dare call on the heart lamp for fear of being discovered, relying solely on memory to find the footholds he and Hongjun had used before.

"Why do you always say the opposite of what you mean? That's no good…"

"I'm not saying the opposite of what I mean; I'm really not going to eat it!"

Li Jinglong looked up toward the top of the cliff, but there seemed to be no end to the darkness that covered the earth. He sucked in a breath around the piton as his feet nearly slipped on a loose stone. Plastered to the rock face, he let the grappling hook's rope swing, half gathered in his hands, and breathed out slowly.

Beneath the dazzling glare of the sun, he flung aside Hongjun's hand, sorely tempted to smack him on the head. Hongjun merely looked at him with a puzzled expression, his cheeks stuffed with food and his hand

outstretched to offer him a pastry. It was as infuriating as it was funny. Li Jinglong wanted to beat him; he also wanted to shove him against the alley wall and kiss him breathless.

Li Jinglong rested a while. When he was ready, he kicked off the side of the cliff and started climbing anew.

Hongjun lay beside the pond. A breeze swept past, dragging a series of ripples across the water's surface. He looked youthful and serene in repose, and the moonlight seemed to shimmer, gentle as the rippling water, as it spilled over him.

"It's infected."

They were pressed together, damp skin to damp skin. Li Jinglong carefully applied medicine to his ear, his eyes shaded with concern, but Hongjun beamed as he pressed the side of his face to the pool's edge, eyes darting back and forth over Li Jinglong's features. Hongjun's handsome face flushed faintly.

"It'll be fine once it scabs over."

Li Jinglong frowned at Hongjun, but Hongjun's smile never wavered.

The world was dark. Li Jinglong's right hand was shaking, the tremors growing more and more severe. He pressed his left hand over his right, pausing against a rocky protrusion.

"Chief, let's go together!"

"Don't cling. This is a government office! Have you no sense of propriety?"

Li Jinglong flung aside Hongjun's hand and strode out of the building. Standing behind the courtyard wall with his face and ears burning, he cursed softly and straightened his robes before hurrying to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review.

Li Jinglong looked up and gauged his progress. *Another six hours to the top*… They had scaled the mountain at a much slower clip the first time. If he pushed himself, he should be able to go faster. His only thought was to reach Yaojin Palace before dawn.

He tossed out the grappling hook, securing it in the rock face above before climbing up. There was no place to stand, so he shoved the piton into

a narrow fissure in the stone and hung one-handed for a spell. He looked down into inky darkness; there was no way to determine how far he had climbed. When he looked up, he could barely see his hand before his face.

Not daring to be careless, he imbued the grappling hook with the power of the heart lamp before casting it upward once more. The hook flew over his head, illuminating the sheer cliff like the dimly seen lamp of a border relay station on a snowy night.

“You did that on purpose!”

“You’re so repressed; are you saving yourself for marriage?” Li Jinglong returned, grinning as he sat with his legs crossed on the bed.

“I don’t want to get married!”

A biting wind whipped past outside the window. Hongjun lay curled in the blankets, his head pillowed on Li Jinglong’s arm. Turning, he threw a leg over Li Jinglong’s waist and wrapped his arms around him. Li Jinglong’s heart beat wildly in his chest as he leaned down to look at his sleeping face, their lips scarcely an inch apart. Hongjun shifted slightly, his head tilting closer, and Li Jinglong shut his eyes, forcing his breath into an even cadence.

“Hongjun…” Gripping the grappling hook, Li Jinglong swung himself back and forth, struggling to build momentum. He ran across the rock face in an arc, leaping for a handhold a short distance away. He seized the jutting stone, his whole body dangling over the cliff. Li Jinglong felt as if his heart was suspended in midair, his life hanging by a thread. He squeezed his eyes shut, the wind roaring in his ears.

In the snowy cemetery, Hongjun’s body erupted with demonic energy that whipped around him like an airborne blade. Enduring the onslaught of infernal fire, Li Jinglong charged forward with his sword in hand.

“Stop—!”

He threw his arms around Hongjun, his chest flaring with light. The black energy wreathing Hongjun dissipated like snow melting beneath the sun, like wind scattering the clouds. The demonic fire became a cluster of comets and shot past with a roar.

Li Jinglong strained every muscle to clamber onto the overhanging rock. It was the same ledge where they had taken cover from the falling ice last time—he was almost there.

In the moment the ice had crashed down over them, he'd instinctively turned to grab Hongjun. He had felt Hongjun's heart thundering in his chest; they were pressed tightly together, nose-to-nose, as they gasped in panicked breaths. Once the noise faded, he'd stared at Hongjun with a smile.

He could feel that their bodies had reacted to each other.

Hands pressed against the side of the mountain, he had studied Hongjun with an impish smile, seized by the urge to lean down and kiss him.

As Li Jinglong caught his breath, he realized he was already among the clouds. Placing the piton back between his teeth, he swung the grappling hook upward again with a burst of energy. He pulled the rope taut with both hands and took a flying leap, then rammed the piton into another fissure high above.

His swing had taken him above the roiling cloud cover, and suddenly, he could see. A thousand beams of silver light scattered in all directions, illuminating the rounded tops of the clouds at his feet.

The moon rises bright over the heavenly mountains, passing betwixt the sea of clouds.[9]

Li Jinglong turned back in disbelief, taking in the sight of the peaks of the Taihang Mountains like driftwood bobbing in a pearl-gray sea. All was still beneath the moon save for the gentle breeze nudging the clouds toward the horizon.

Hongjun stirred at the faint scrape of the grappling hook catching on the railing of the platform. Opening his eyes, he took in the sight of Chong Ming sleeping soundly beneath the parasol tree, bathed in the moonlight slanting from the west. He glanced down at the chain around his ankle, then toward the far end of the platform.

Li Jinglong was gathering the grappling hook, his right hand shaking uncontrollably. He turned, and his eyes found Hongjun by the pond.

The horizon had begun to whiten with dawn; Hongjun watched with wide eyes as Li Jinglong laughed silently between shallow gasps for breath. Eyes fixed on Hongjun, he trod as quietly as possible as he dragged his exhausted body over, his steps starting slow and picking up speed until at last he bent down to sweep Hongjun into a fierce embrace.

Hongjun couldn't help sobbing as he clung back just as fiercely. Li Jinglong pressed a kiss to his hair.

"Shhh," Li Jinglong said, his mouth beside Hongjun's ear. He shot a glance at the slumbering Chong Ming, then pointed at the chain around Hongjun's ankle. Hongjun looked up and shook his head.

Li Jinglong dropped to one knee with a frown, racking his brain for ideas. Hongjun grabbed him tight around the waist. Li Jinglong tried several times to pry him off so he could look for something to cut the chain, but Hongjun only held on tighter.

"Let go," Li Jinglong whispered.

Hongjun clung to him without speaking. Suddenly he understood the joy and sorrow, the desolation, anger, and myriad other emotions that had crowded his heart these past days. All of them sprang from his desire to stay with Li Jinglong always, and his fear of losing what he had. He didn't know why or how he'd come to feel this way, but the realization was inescapable, like soft feathers covering heaven and earth, landing gently on the most vulnerable part of his heart.

"Hongjun, let go," Li Jinglong whispered again, patting him lightly on the back. He was about to go mad from anxiety. "I went to all that trouble climbing up here. What's the matter with you?"

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Releasing him at last, Hongjun looked up with tears in his eyes.

Li Jinglong had half a mind to pull Hongjun back into his arms at the sight, but he couldn't afford to be distracted now. He motioned for Hongjun to wait for him, then crouched low and picked his way around the pond, peering into the main hall as he searched for anything that might be used to pry open Hongjun's bonds.

Hongjun made a throwing gesture, indicating that he should find his knives. Li Jinglong waved a hand, then pointed at himself—*leave it to me.*

He was about to straighten up when he came face to face with Qing Xiong staggering out of the main hall. His chest was covered in wounds, and he smelled strongly of medicinal wine. The atmosphere immediately grew tense. Hongjun glanced at Chong Ming sleeping under the parasol tree before turning back to Qing Xiong, his nerves singing.

Li Jinglong unsheathed the Sword of Wisdom. His right hand was trembling, but he forced himself to calm as he stared down Qing Xiong.

Qing Xiong's lips moved, though no sound emerged. Hongjun couldn't see what he mouthed, but Li Jinglong understood immediately—

Promise me that even if you die and become a fallen corpse ghost, you'll always protect him.

Li Jinglong sheathed his sword and nodded once, slowly.

Qing Xiong tossed out a black feather gleaming with golden light. It winged toward Hongjun, breaking the chain cleanly in two. With another wave of his hand, a blast of energy struck Li Jinglong, knocking him over the platform's edge.

Hongjun dove to catch him.

Li Jinglong locked his hand around Hongjun's wrist, pulling him into a tight embrace as they plummeted over the cliff. The great peng's feather shot toward Li Jinglong and transformed into wings of light that silently bore the two of them up. Qing Xiong's fingers flicked, and five beams of light streaked across the predawn sky like shooting stars. One hand wrapped securely around Hongjun, Li Jinglong caught those bright stars in his other with incredible accuracy: They were the pentacolor sacred light and a set of four throwing knives.

Hongjun clung to Li Jinglong as he flipped in the air. The wings of light sliced through the sea of mist, carrying them toward the far end of the mountain range with the rising sun at their backs.

As they skimmed over clouds, they heard a thunderous explosion from Yaojin Palace behind them.

Hongjun and Li Jinglong whipped their heads around to see a raging fireball and a golden cloud come hurtling through the sky. A fierce gale roared to life, dispelling the thick layers of mist in a blink.

“It’s Chong Ming!” Hongjun said. “Chong Ming’s awake!”

Li Jinglong said nothing, merely tightening his arms around Hongjun. Hongjun craned his neck, but Li Jinglong lifted a hand, blocking his vision. They flew faster and faster, whistling through the sky beyond the valleys that marked the end of the Taihang Mountain range.

They struck the ground in a roll, crash-landing in a grassy meadow. After tumbling a few times, Hongjun leapt to his feet and staggered up a small hill. Li Jinglong chased after him. “Hongjun!”

Coming to a stop at the hill’s crest, Hongjun stared vacantly at Yaojin Palace in the distance. Chong Ming’s fury was visible even at this distance; the phoenix and peng blurred into balls of pure light as they clashed. The lonely spire on which he’d been imprisoned collapsed beneath the force of their battle, sinking beneath the clouds in a smoking ruin.

He turned to look at Li Jinglong, who returned his gaze with guilt in his eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t think—”

Hongjun threw himself at him, hugging him tightly.

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Chapter 75:
An Unexpected Guest

IN THE THIRTEENTH year of Tianbao, on the third day of the third month, spring arrived in the Guanzhong region. The mild winter had receded, and the peach blossoms in Chang'an were in full bloom.

Messengers from afar hurried to and fro on horseback; officials from all over the country were busy dispatching rare treasures to the capital in honor of the noble consort's thirty-fifth birthday, which would occur in the sixth month of that year. The Tajiks, the Semu, the Göktürks, the Tibetans—all the different ethnic groups beyond the Great Wall—knew Li Longji doted on Noble Consort Yang. No pledge of allegiance could compare to the favor of the Yang family. They wisely made their preparations early.

There were still nearly a hundred days left until the noble consort's birthday, but Chang'an was bustling with activity. Lamps were lit around the clock in Daming Palace as a thousand weavers gathered to weave longevity brocade. From Guanzhong to Luoyang and the Central Plains, artisans rushed to prepare lanterns, colored candles, fluttering silk, and other necessities for the festivities. Great Tang had mobilized the entire country to celebrate Yang Yuhuan's birthday, displaying the grandeur of a nation so powerful that emissaries flocked from all corners of the world to pay their respects.

Spring was in the air at the Department of Exorcism too. Mergen and the others had never thought that, after the span of a single winter, everyone would gather here once more. Qiu Yongsi had barely caught his breath and eaten a few mouthfuls of Jiangnan's familiar cuisine before hitting the road again; after traveling so long, returning to the Department of Exorcism afforded him a rare moment of relaxation. A-Tai, in contrast, was buried beneath a mountain of debt. He and Ashina Adarvan had been racking their brains for weeks trying to figure out how to make money.

"Where's Hongjun?" Lu Xu asked expressionlessly.

"The chief will bring him back, don't worry," Mergen responded. "Where do you want to go today?"

Hongjun had left them all behind on that snowy New Year's Eve, dashing away on horseback. Li Jinglong had ordered everyone else to stay put in Chang'an, promising he would bring Hongjun back with him. Only by exhausting every trick in his arsenal had Mergen prevented Lu Xu from going after Hongjun himself. Lu Xu had nowhere else to go and didn't want to stay in Hexi by himself, so in the end he had followed the others to Chang'an, where they all took up residence in the Department of Exorcism to wait.

But none of them had expected Hongjun and Li Jinglong to be gone for a full three months. Within that time, they had received only a single letter from Li Jinglong informing them that he was returning to the Taihang Mountains with Hongjun.

Lu Xu, born and raised in the north, had never seen prosperity like that of Chang'an. Much like Hongjun when he first came to the human realm, he was stunned by the sights of Guanzhong even before reaching the capital. Upon entering Chang'an proper, he was so staggered by the most magnificent metropolis of the Divine Land that he managed to set aside his unhappiness, at least for the time being. He had been furious with Mergen after their adventure in Dunhuang, but after reflecting over these past few months, he realized it wasn't worth staying angry about forever.

Mergen, on the other hand, remained deeply conflicted. Should he dote on the white deer as his bride-to-be? Or should he treat him as his brother-in-arms? This was supposed to be the fated love of his life, yet the heavens had decided to send a man instead of a woman. But if he didn't follow the laws of his tribe and wed Lu Xu, what kind of life would he have—could he even return home?

"You should ask the chief what to do," A-Tai suggested.

"Ask the chief," Qiu Yongsi agreed.

"You should've said something earlier!" Ashina Adarvan chimed in. "If you don't want him, give him to me."

That, Mergen didn't dignify with a response. Despite his brothers' advice, he couldn't seem to land on a satisfactory answer. Even so, he liked Lu Xu very much. Whether or not he became his wife, it was Mergen's responsibility to care for the white deer and stay by his side.

Thus Mergen followed Li Jinglong's example and settled Lu Xu in the spare room between his and Hongjun's rooms. Lu Xu had praised the beauty of Chang'an's peach blossoms when they entered the city—he had never seen anything like them in the north—so Mergen bought a few peach trees and planted them in the courtyard.

At first he'd suspected Lu Xu had fallen for Hongjun and had eyes for no one else, but gradually, Lu Xu warmed up to Qiu Yongsi, A-Tai, and even Ashina Adarvan. He'd stuck so closely to Hongjun in Dunhuang simply because Hongjun was the only person he knew; thanks to their history, he felt most at ease with him after getting his body back.

Qiu Yongsi and A-Tai were one thing, but Mergen struggled to accept Lu Xu's change of heart toward Ashina Adarvan. A-Tai's young friend had openly declared he liked beautiful boys. To make matters worse, Li Jinglong had never formally stated whether Ashina Adarvan now counted among the ranks of the Department of Exorcism. Having him here was tantamount to raising a wolf in one's own home—granted, in this home, Mergen was the real wolf.

Regardless, he'd gone out of his way to prevent Lu Xu from getting too close to Ashina Adarvan. Luckily, Ashina Adarvan didn't seem all that interested in Lu Xu; he flirted outrageously from time to time, but generally kept his hands to himself. Mergen, meanwhile, made a point of inviting Lu Xu out every day, leaving Ashina Adarvan behind with A-Tai to count money and sort out how to raise the funds to feed their faraway army.

The battle between Chong Ming and Qing Xiong was intense but mercifully brief; after they flattened a few peaks, peace descended over the mountain range once more.

When the dust settled at last, Li Jinglong turned to Hongjun. "Let's go home."

Yaojin Palace was his home no longer. The look Qing Xiong had given him as he left had seemed to say it all: *Go on then, back to where you belong*.

It had been merely six months since he'd left Yaojin Palace for the first time, but in that span, Hongjun had contended with an overwhelming

number of revelations. He'd uncovered one truth after another until he was practically drowning in them.

That night, as he sat beside Li Jinglong before their campfire in the wilderness, he asked in a daze, "Chief, am I going to die?"

"Call me Jinglong," Li Jinglong said. "It's been a long time since anyone called me that. You won't die, Hongjun. I promise."

Hongjun gazed at him, his heart a complicated tangle of emotions. Ever since Li Jinglong had made the dangerous climb up to Yaojin Palace, Hongjun had more or less realized his feelings toward him. The vague melancholy he'd felt over the course of their journey, the sudden pounding of his heart whenever their eyes met… He found himself dwelling on every moment they'd spent together, even when Li Jinglong was right there in front of him.

Li Jinglong, however, hadn't said a word about Hongjun's feelings or his own. He acted as if nothing had changed, but whenever he noticed Hongjun peering at him, he averted his gaze. An awkwardness had risen between them in the aftermath of their dramatic escape from Yaojin Palace. They spoke rarely on the road back to Chang'an; Li Jinglong didn't even ask Hongjun to ride with him.

Yet Hongjun needed only open his mouth, and Li Jinglong would do everything in his power to fulfill his requests.

"I don't want to ride anymore," Hongjun told Li Jinglong. "It's so tiring."

"I'll go into the town up ahead and rent us a carriage," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun was dumbstruck. He'd only wanted to ride with Li Jinglong—he couldn't explain it, but he wanted to stay close to him. It never occurred to him that Li Jinglong might misunderstand. Nevertheless, shortly after leaving the Taihang Mountains, Li Jinglong rented a wagon, and they joined a westbound merchant caravan heading for the Ba-Shu region for the spring trade.

Sitting amid a large pile of porcelain, three-color sancai glazed pottery, wine, silk, and other merchant wares, they continued toward Chang'an. Along the way, Li Jinglong pointed out the spring scenery to

Hongjun and thought up all sorts of topics to keep him entertained—he was evidently worried Hongjun was depressed. But Hongjun was an optimistic young man at heart, and his mood gradually improved.

Burdened by his new self-awareness, Hongjun felt guilty joking around with Li Jinglong when they shared a bed at night. Li Jinglong seemed to sense his wariness and kept his distance as well. At first, the two of them simply lay there, side by side, the picture of propriety. But as night after night went by, Hongjun couldn't resist going back to his old ways of wrapping himself around Li Jinglong to sleep. Li Jinglong responded as he always had, neither taking initiative nor refusing Hongjun's advances.

By the time they neared Chang'an, Hongjun felt like he was going crazy.

On the last day of their journey, they mounted their horses once more and bade the merchants—who were changing course for Central Shu—farewell.

"We're home," Li Jinglong said, spotting Chang'an's walls in the distance.

Urging his horse to the top of a small hill, Hongjun gazed at the magnificent capital of Great Tang on the vast Guanzhong Plain. He could practically see the festive revelry of Pingkang Ward; the imposing majesty of Imperial Street; the gleaming glazed roof tiles of Xingqing Palace; the bustle of the East and West Markets; and last but not least, the Department of Exorcism, where a gentle breeze stirred countless ripples in a pool of spring water. As he looked down over the city, Hongjun was seized by the certainty that he'd found where he belonged.

"Shall we race?" Li Jinglong asked. Without waiting for a response, he took off for Chang'an at a gallop, leaving Hongjun in the dust. Yelping in protest, Hongjun spurred his horse after him.

Chang'an was a flourishing scene in the third month of the year. Li Jinglong slowed as they gained the city gates. The sentries on the city walls shouted, "Chief Li! You're finally back!"

Li Jinglong let Hongjun pass through the gates first. As expected after such a long absence, the Imperial Court of Judicial Review and the various divisions of the imperial guard were both looking for him. Hongjun

watched as he dispatched a messenger with a letter to be delivered to the imperial guard. Feeling a bit forlorn, he offered, “You can go and take care of business first.”

“It’s not that urgent.” Li Jinglong looked around thoughtfully, as if assessing the state of the city. He threw Hongjun a smile. “Let’s go!”

They crossed Xingwu Bridge. Noticing the peach blossoms beneath the bridge, Li Jinglong said, “In a few days, cherry blossoms will open too. I’ll have someone plant some cherry trees outside your room.”

The trees lining the street leading to Jincheng Ward had begun to sprout pale green leaves, a welcome sight after months of bare branches. Li Jinglong and Hongjun were chatting happily about the upcoming spring hunt and the noble consort’s birthday celebration when they turned the corner to find nearly a hundred men of the Shenwu Guard in full battle regalia, blocking the alleyway outside the Department of Exorcism.

“It’s such a grand ceremony for a birthday…” Hongjun trailed off at the sight of the crowd. *What now?!*

“Chief Li’s back!” one of the guards called.

Li Jinglong gestured for Hongjun to keep quiet and squared his shoulders to face the guards. The soldiers parted as they entered the alley, revealing a young Hu woman brandishing a whip as several guards writhed and screamed on the ground. Shivering in fear beside the woman were A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan, both ashen-faced. A familiar fish head peeked over the wall.

“Hongjun!” the carp yao screamed hysterically upon seeing him.

Hongjun gestured sharply for the fish to shut up. Li Jinglong frowned. “What’s going on here?”

The Hu woman set her hands on her hips. “Who’s in charge of this place?! Get out here; I’d like a word!”

She had skin like burnished bronze, a head of glossy curls, and bright obsidian eyes framed by thick lashes. Her figure was generously curved with a slender waist, and she wore a sleeveless moxiong paired with a long skirt. Bells jingled at her wrists. Hongjun’s heart skipped a beat as she turned; he couldn’t help but gasp in astonishment at her beauty.

“Turandokht,” A-Tai hastily interjected. “That’s our leader, right over there!”

The carp yao had shrunk back inside. The woman called Turandokht pointed her whip at Li Jinglong. “You! Get over here.”

The leader of the Shenwu guards saw his chance. “In that case, we’ll leave it to Chief Li!”

The group picked up their fallen comrades and scarpered from the scene.

Li Jinglong studied Turandokht. “How may I help you?”

“I’m here for my fiancé.” Turandokht raised her chin. “Why are you all protecting him? That’s him right there! Tigra! Explain yourself! And you! Ashina Adarvan!”

Hongjun and Li Jinglong stared in shock as Turandokht grabbed A-Tai, usually so unflappable, and dragged him forward by the sleeve. Quivering like a mouse before a cat, A-Tai shot Hongjun and Li Jinglong a pleading look.

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Hongjun wasn’t scared of any whip. “Hey!” he yelled. “Let him go!”

“You want him?” Interest piqued, Turandokht kicked A-Tai aside. “Come then, shall we fight?!”

“Stop!” A-Tai and Li Jinglong shouted at once.

After a long and confused conversation, Li Jinglong finally discovered what had happened: A-Tai’s fiancée had come knocking and, without any further explanation, insisted on leaving with him. A-Tai seemed to be terrified of the girl; meanwhile, the other members of the Department of Exorcism had never even heard of her.

Afraid the Hu woman would assume he was one of A-Tai’s accomplices, Qiu Yongsi had promptly made a break for it. Mergen, too, was no fool; he’d shooed Lu Xu out the door for an impromptu outing. They were all grown men, but the moment adversity struck, they had scattered in an instant. Ashina Adarvan would have run as well, had Turandokht not cornered him along with A-Tai before the Department of Exorcism’s front gate.

The squad of Shenwu guards responsible for patrolling the area had just happened to stumble across the altercation. They had ordered Turandokht not to make a scene in front of a government office, only to be cowed by a single strike of the young Hu woman’s whip.

“Does it really hurt that much?” Li Jinglong asked, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“You mustn’t anger her under any circumstances!” A-Tai said. He and Ashina Adarvan were like a pair of terrified birds ready to take flight.

Li Jinglong turned to Turandokht. “This is a government office, Your Highness. When Tigra steps through these doors, he becomes an exorcist beholden to the imperial court. He is currently on duty. Even if you have a family matter to resolve, I cannot allow you to simply take him away.”

“And why should I believe you?” Turandokht demanded. “You’ve no idea how much I’ve suffered looking for this bastard, yet you’re protecting him?! What about me? Has anyone ever given a thought to me?”

She looked completely fearless, but her words made Hongjun’s heart twinge in sympathy. “How long have you been looking for him?”

“Three years! It’s been three whole years!”

Hongjun had instinctively protected A-Tai, but upon hearing this, he turned on him. “A-Tai! How could you?!” he shouted angrily.

“Whose side are you on, Hongjun?!” A-Tai cried.

“This is where Tigra is living in Chang’an,” Li Jinglong explained patiently. “He’s a registered exorcist, so he won’t be going anywhere for the time being. Why don’t we…talk inside?”

Li Jinglong raised a hand, and the wall of the Department of Exorcism parted to reveal the main gate. Turandokht exhaled a sigh of relief. Everyone filed inside, where the carp yao threw himself into Hongjun’s arms.

The travel-worn pair had hardly settled themselves when Qiu Yongsi, Mergen, and Lu Xu returned as well. Spotting Hongjun, Lu Xu exclaimed in joy. He kicked off his boots and jumped onto Hongjun’s back, both of them breaking into delighted laughter. Li Jinglong warned them to catch up later and gathered everyone together to make tea—they would see to Turandokht’s business first.

Before such a large audience, Turandokht’s ferocity seemed to fade. She burst into tears, berating A-Tai at length in Tokharian. A-Tai’s usual insouciance and *hai mie hou bis* seemed to abandon him as he apologized again and again.

“Punish me however you want,” A-Tai said. “Just don’t strike me with that whip.”

“Saozi,”[10] Ashina Adarvan chimed in, “it’s not my fault. I just found this asshole before the turn of the year myself.”

Everyone was speechless.

Turandokht turned back to Li Jinglong and the others. “Do you have any idea how difficult it’s been trying to find him?!”

Everyone nodded hastily, their eyes fixed on her whip.

“Relax, I won’t hit you with the Whip of Unbearable Torment.”

“So it’s called the Whip of Unbearable Torment,” Hongjun marveled, bobbing his head in understanding.

Turandokht returned to venting her anger until Li Jinglong interjected, “It’s getting late. Why don’t you…”

He paused, unsure whether he ought to suggest Turandokht stay the night. Although she and A-Tai were apparently engaged, they had yet to marry. As lax as Great Tang might be with regard to folk customs, inviting her to stay the night breached common rules of propriety.

“I’ve opened a tavern in the West Market,” Turandokht said, wiping her eyes. “I’ll come over once a day, Tigra, so if you dare run again—”

“You can whip all of them,” A-Tai suggested.

“Shut up!” everyone else snapped.

“Take her home!” Li Jinglong ordered furiously. “What kind of nonsense is this, Tigra?! Come see me when you get back—I’m not through with you!”

A-Tai meekly led Turandokht out. The moment he was out the door, the others lambasted A-Tai at length for acting so shamelessly—to think he’d been engaged this whole time! More importantly, he had brought trouble down on the Department of Exorcism; his behavior was simply outrageous.

When they were finished airing their complaints, they settled down and began to catch each other up on all that had happened since they parted ways.

Li Jinglong gave a quick summary of how he and Hongjun had climbed the Taihang Mountains and visited Chong Ming. He assured the group that they’d already come up with a solution to their most pressing problem.

What solution? Hongjun shot Li Jinglong a questioning look.

Li Jinglong caught his gaze and nodded, eyes curved in a reassuring smile. *Just trust me*.

“We left in a hurry,” Li Jinglong said regretfully. “We forgot to bring a few souvenirs from his home to share with you all.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Qiu Yongsi said hastily. “As long as you’ve sorted everything out, it’s fine.”

“Right—that’s great news!” Mergen concurred.

Lu Xu cast Hongjun a doubtful glance, but Hongjun nodded reassuringly.

Now it was everyone else’s turn to fill Li Jinglong in on the miscellaneous matters of the Department of Exorcism. In the chief’s absence, the other members had nominated Mergen as acting leader. The Imperial Court of Judicial Review had also sent over a number of case files, which they’d set aside for the time being.

“Again?” Li Jinglong asked.

“With the noble consort’s birthday approaching, the imperial guard and the Court of Judicial Review are afraid of making any mistakes. They’ve been sending all their unsolved cases to us.”

Li Jinglong hummed thoughtfully. “I need to report to the crown prince and the emperor about what happened in Hexi. I’ll meet with His Majesty in the next few days. In the meantime, you can all have a proper rest.”

“What about the black jiao?” Lu Xu asked abruptly.

Li Jinglong seemed to have expected his question. “We wait for him to come to us,” he answered. “I have a plan, but I still need to sort out the finer details. I’ll let you know when I do, and you can give me your thoughts then. That’s it for today.”

Everyone dispersed. On the way to his room, Hongjun stopped and exclaimed in surprise at the courtyard full of peach blossoms.

Lu Xu followed him as he wandered back and forth between the new trees. “It’s nice here,” he admitted.

“You like it?” Hongjun asked, bending to examine some blooms.

Lu Xu seemed a bit lost as he stood beneath the flowering peach trees, letting the spring breeze tug at his clothes. Instead of answering, he said, “Hongjun, don’t worry. When my horns grow out, I’ll help you.”

So he’d already guessed the truth. Hongjun sighed and straightened up, coming to stand next to him. Wrapping an arm around Lu Xu’s shoulders, he guided him to his long-unused room.

Li Jinglong was walking down the hall when he was startled by the sight of Hongjun leading Lu Xu smoothly into his room and shutting the door behind them. He could only guess what clandestine activities they were up to.

Behind him, Mergen said, “Chief, I need to ask you something.”

Li Jinglong waved him aside as he stepped closer to press his ear to the door.

“Hey!” Mergen called out. “Come on, let’s go!”

Shaking his head, he dragged Li Jinglong away.

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Chapter 76:
Heart Aflutter

STANDING IN the courtyard, Mergen spilled out everything that had happened between him and Lu Xu since they returned to Chang'an, then looked at Li Jinglong expectantly.

To his dismay, Li Jinglong was delighted by his misfortune. "And here I'm still waiting to officiate your union. When's the wedding?" he quipped.

"What about you and Hongjun?" Mergen retorted, after staring speechless for a few seconds.

Li Jinglong went mute as Mergen looked him up and down. After a moment of consideration, he said, "His dad entrusted him to me." Li Jinglong's mind was still stuck on whatever secret Hongjun was sharing with Lu Xu; he couldn't focus on Mergen's predicament at all. "Anyway, what does it have to do with you?"

"It has everything to do with me." Seeming to conquer some internal struggle, Mergen finally gritted out, "I meant, when are you and Hongjun getting married?"

"Don't use that word!" Li Jinglong ordered. "It's way too awkward! I'm not marrying him, and he's not marrying me… Must you put it in those terms?"

Mergen glanced doubtfully at Li Jinglong. "But you guys seem pretty serious, Chief. You've already done it, right?"

Li Jinglong gave him an incredulous look. "I thought you had urgent business, but you keep asking about stuff like this. Are these appropriate questions for a subordinate to ask his superior?"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Mergen grabbed Li Jinglong's arm. "Chief, please, you have to understand—"

"There's nothing to explain regarding Hongjun and me," Li Jinglong said curtly.

“I don’t know what to do if you guys don’t take the lead!” Mergen cried at last.

It was a long moment before Li Jinglong grasped Mergen’s meaning. “You need me to teach you?! If you like him, just go for it!”

But Mergen was truly confounded. Perhaps it didn’t really matter whether the white deer was male or female—but the thought of marrying a man strained the limits of his imagination. In all the legends, there had never been a case where the gray wolf and the white deer were both male.

“I’ll be struck by lightning!” Mergen said finally.

Li Jinglong’s expression darkened. “Mergen, are you trying to curse me?”

Mergen flapped a hand at him; that wasn’t what he meant. “Homosexual relations with boys were indeed once a custom among Shiwei men, but—”

“Then what’s the problem?” Li Jinglong asked. “Shall I ask the crown prince to confer an engagement so you can consummate your marriage at once?”

“—that’s considered loutish behavior now… Uhh, I mean no insult to you, Chief, but among the Shiwei, only uncultured oafs would fuck…uhh… livestock and young boys…”

“Shut up,” Li Jinglong said firmly. “Is there something you need? If not, I’m leaving.”

“You’d better make a move first, Chief,” Mergen persisted. “Once you and Hongjun are officially together, I’ll feel more confident in my chances too. Sort of like…leading by example?”

As Li Jinglong stared at Mergen, he noticed the carp yao behind him, eyeing the two of them with suspicion. Beckoning Mergen closer, Li Jinglong whispered into his ear, “Brother, rather than worrying about sinning with livestock, you ought to be more concerned about whether Lu Xu will even agree to it.”

Li Jinglong raised his brows pointedly at Mergen. Lu Xu no longer had his antlers, but he was incredibly fleet-footed. Even Hongjun couldn’t

keep up when he ran at full speed. If Lu Xu was unwilling, Mergen would never catch him.

Mergen couldn’t summon a response.

“In any case, keep me out of it,” Li Jinglong said.

He was about to make his escape when the carp yao accosted him. “Hey, Second-in-Command!” he called out airily. “There’s something I need to ask you.”

For a moment, Li Jinglong was sorely tempted to do as Hongjun had taught him on the road—sharpen a tree branch into a spit, skewer the fish, and roast him over an open fire.

“Go ahead, Boss,” Li Jinglong said instead, seemingly all ears.

The carp yao eyed him warily. Li Jinglong returned his gaze with a wooden calm.

Hongjun had finally returned home after months on the road. Lying on his bed as he talked to Lu Xu, he decided the Department of Exorcism was simply the most comfortable place on earth. He didn’t want to go anywhere else.

When he’d finished recounting all that had happened at Yaojin Palace, he turned to Lu Xu. “When will your antlers grow out?”

Lu Xu sat beside Hongjun on the bed. He shook his head, his eyes distant. “Do you still want to know your past? My powers have recovered slightly. They’re not as strong as before, but I might be able to let you dream.”

Hongjun shook his head in return. “Not anymore,” he said with a smile.

If there was one thing from the past Hongjun remained fixated on, it was his shared history with Li Jinglong. This was precisely the reason Lu Xu was so worried about Hongjun—he couldn’t help his surprise at Hongjun’s response.

“You ought to face things directly,” Lu Xu said. “You know perfectly well why you feel the way you do. Whether it’s love or hatred, why are you

so reluctant to admit it? There's no point lying to yourself."

This time, it was Hongjun's turn to be surprised. Lu Xu was talking about the past, but his words were the best solution for Hongjun's present anxieties.

Why are you so reluctant to admit it? There's no point lying to yourself.

"You're right," Hongjun said in relief. "But it's not that I don't want to admit it—because I do. It's just that I learned a lot of things on my trip home, and the more I dwell on my past, the sadder I feel. Right now, I don't want to dig any deeper."

Feeling a bit helpless, Lu Xu asked, "So then…the demon seed…"

Hongjun sat up. "Lu Xu, I have an idea," he said seriously.

Lu Xu blinked in surprise.

Even Hongjun knew Li Jinglong was only trying to comfort him when he told everyone they'd found a solution earlier that day. It had been his way of getting everyone else to stop worrying about him. In all likelihood, the chief didn't have any special plan. At most he would set up a barrier inside the Department of Exorcism and try to exorcise the demon seed, as others had done when Hongjun was a child. Yet this time, he no longer had his father to save him, nor his mother to prolong his life. This was his fate—perhaps he would never be able to rid himself of the demon seed in this lifetime.

In that case, he explained to Lu Xu, why not live happily for a while longer? When he finally became Mara, he would simply accept the fatal blow from Li Jinglong's golden sword and depart this world. That would be that.

"You…" Lu Xu began, hesitant.

By contrast, Hongjun seemed completely unbothered by the idea. "Qing Xiong always says the mushroom of the morning knows not what transpires between the beginning and end of the month, and the summer cicada knows nothing of spring or autumn. All living things will die; even heaven and earth cannot last forever. What does it matter whether I live a long life or a short one?"

On the way back to Chang’an, he’d often found himself staring at Li Jinglong. The closer his feelings came to bursting out, the guiltier he felt—with regard to himself, as well as Li Jinglong.

“You can’t think like that, Hongjun!” Lu Xu protested.

Hongjun merely offered Lu Xu a smile. After all he’d experienced, he had gradually come to accept this unpleasant truth.

Back in the courtyard, the carp yao looked at Li Jinglong. “You still haven’t figured out how to exorcise Mara, have you?”

Mergen turned to him as well. “Lu Xu’s been asking me how we’re going to deal with Hongjun’s demon seed too.”

The Department of Exorcism counted no idiots among its number. Naturally, everyone had assumed Li Jinglong was bluffing but nodded along so as not to worry Hongjun.

“Actually,” Li Jinglong said, “I do have an idea. But I’m not completely sure it’ll work.”

“Let’s hear it then,” the carp yao said. “I promised Master Qing Xiong I’d take good care of Hongjun.”

“Hongjun is no longer your responsibility!” Li Jinglong snapped. “Where were you when I nearly died scaling a mountain to get him back?”

“Why are you getting so mad at a fish?” Mergen intervened, exasperated.

“Third-in-Command, is this insubordination?!”

Li Jinglong didn’t have the energy to get truly angry. He studied the carp yao—he was certain this creature knew much more than he let on about Hongjun’s situation—then glanced at Mergen.

Mergen’s questioning had produced an inexplicable frisson of anxiety. Li Jinglong’s plan was all conjecture at this point; he was afraid the moment he said it aloud, Mergen would ruthlessly poke it full of holes. This was what Li Jinglong feared most—after all, he wasn’t like the others. He didn’t have the traditional background and qualifications of an exorcist, nor did he have a master to teach and advise him.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” he said at last, turning away.

“Tell us now,” said Mergen. “You’re not the only one who cares about Hongjun.”

Reluctantly, Li Jinglong stopped and glanced back. “The demon seed isn’t in his body.”

“Really?” The carp yao was thrilled.

Mergen frowned slightly as Li Jinglong continued: “It’s in his soul.”

“That’s right,” Mergen said with a nod.

“Can’t you say it all in one go?!” the carp yao yelped.

“Do you remember when we entered *The Jataka of the Deer King*?” Li Jinglong asked. “When Lu Xu’s soul separated from his body, the heart demon separated from him as well.”

“Mm. But that wasn’t the case with Hongjun,” Mergen pointed out.

“The demon seed of Mara is fused with his soul,” Li Jinglong said, grim. “Or rather—I didn’t want to put it like this, but…”

Mergen gestured—*spit it out*.

Li Jinglong steeled himself. “There’s no such thing as a ‘demon seed of Mara.’ Hongjun himself is the demon seed.”

Mergen’s breath caught; he felt as if a basin of cold water had been dumped over his head. The carp yao at his side gaped at Li Jinglong in shock before looking around nervously, as if ready to make a run for it.

Li Jinglong realized at once that he had guessed right. “I knew it. Zhao Zilong! What else are you keeping from us?!”

The carp yao squirmed, no longer daring to refer to himself as *Boss*. “I only overheard Master Qing Xiong say so by accident!” he cried. “You’ve guessed it all! Chief, you’re so smart!”

Having confirmed his hypothesis, Li Jinglong continued more confidently, “We all thought Kong Xuan had some sort of dark object inside his body,” he said, pointing to his own chest for emphasis. “To relieve himself of this threat, he went out and got himself a son…”

He gestured as he spoke, miming the motion of pulling out his own heart and putting it into a child. “In doing so, he removed the demon seed of Mara from himself and planted it in Hongjun’s soul,” Li Jinglong said. “But that’s the thing—I feel like everyone, including Hongjun’s father, has been thinking about this the wrong way from the start. Hongjun doesn’t *have* a soul; he is the very demon seed Kong Xuan extracted. To adapt to its human body, the demon seed took the form of a soul. If we remove the demon seed, we would essentially be destroying Hongjun’s soul itself.”

Mergen sat down heavily on the railing. Since he had already said this much, Li Jinglong saw no harm in asking, “Does my conjecture sound right to you?”

“Yes,” Mergen mumbled.

Li Jinglong raised a finger for silence. “Don’t tell anyone under any circumstances. Hongjun is too sensitive about this.”

Mergen lifted a hand: He understood.

“It shows how smart you are that you even thought this far,” the carp yao said. “In that case, how do you plan on getting rid of it? Even Chong Ming couldn’t come up with anything—”

“I don’t intend to get rid of it,” Li Jinglong said. “I’ll leave Hongjun as he is and let him live on. Not only that, but I plan on taking good care of him. Whether he’s a yao, human, or even a demon, what does it matter?”

Mergen and the carp yao stared at Li Jinglong in disbelief. He continued, “To be honest, going home with him this time wasn’t exactly a pleasure jaunt. But it did confirm my theory. If handled properly, what I’m proposing is entirely possible—in fact, Chong Ming tried to do the same thing.”

Li Jinglong cupped his hands. “Suppose we can create a shell or seal that can protect Hongjun for the time being. To Xie Yu, Hongjun’s greatest purpose is to allow for the birth of Mara. He will most certainly try to find Hongjun and flood his body with demonic energy, just like in Dunhuang.”

Recalling that snowy night, Mergen made a sound of agreement, his brow knitting in a frown.

“If my heart lamp is strong enough, I can stand guard over this seal and purify the demonic energy, or perhaps set a trap nearby… Honestly, I haven’t figured this part out yet. Yaojin Palace functioned as Chong Ming’s ‘seal.’ The only thing I don’t understand is why Qing Xiong changed his mind about letting Hongjun leave it.”

“It’s because Master Chong Ming will soon reach nirvana,” the carp yao explained.

Li Jinglong started in surprise. “How long does he have left?”

The carp yao began to count on his fingers, but Mergen hastily put a stop to this pointless exercise. “Shouldn’t Chong Ming be aware of this?”

“Of course he’s aware,” the carp yao said. “That’s why he’s so conflicted.”

Li Jinglong’s stomach twisted in worry. Studying Mergen’s face, he asked carefully, “Do you think this plan is feasible?”

“It makes a lot of sense, Chief.” Mergen’s answer was prompt. “But how are you going to seal Hongjun?”

“I mean it, Hongjun. You can’t think like that,” Lu Xu repeated, sitting up on the bed. “I’ve thought this for a while—that Li Jinglong fellow is more than he seems.”

Hongjun blinked in surprise. “More than he seems?” After mulling this over, he laughed. “He’s indeed much more than he seems. To come this far, despite being an ordinary man…”

Lu Xu shook his head. “I’m not talking about his willpower or his spiritual abilities. I heard a lot about him from the big wolf. If you ask me, he has some sort of innate ability.”

Hongjun didn’t want to discuss such a heavy topic now—he seized upon the words *big wolf*. “You know, Mergen’s been set on taking you as his wife since before he even met you.”

“Don’t say that!” Lu Xu said, putting a halt to Hongjun’s teasing at once. “The gray wolf only loves the white deer of his destiny—the me in his imagination. If I were anyone else, he would treat that person just the same; it would make no difference to him.”

“But it *would* be different to him,” Hongjun said immediately.

“How so?”

“It just would,” Hongjun repeated with a childish stubbornness.

Suddenly, he desperately hoped Mergen and Lu Xu would work out. Hongjun hadn’t grasped the significance before, but now it hit him: How many people out there were lucky enough to be granted a destiny by the heavens? Determined to change Lu Xu’s mind, he began to praise Mergen in earnest.

Lu Xu tried to turn the conversation back to Li Jinglong, only for Hongjun to interrupt him time and time again. Irritated, he picked up a cushion and lobbed it at Hongjun’s head. Hongjun took up a pillow of his own, and a fight commenced, their voices rising to a clamor.

The door flew open and Mergen burst in. “Stop fighting!” he shouted over the din.

“Get out!” Lu Xu snapped.

“We’re not fighting!” Hongjun added.

A pair of pillows hurtled toward the door, knocking Mergen off his feet.

Li Jinglong peeked in from behind him. “It’s time for dinner.”

That evening, the Department of Exorcism was a sea of warm light as everyone—with the exception of A-Tai, who had yet to come back from seeing Turandokht home—set the table for dinner and poured wine in celebration of Li Jinglong and Hongjun’s return.

Everything was back to normal. Hongjun had missed the others, but he also felt a twinge of regret: Now that they were home, he could no longer share a bed with Li Jinglong.

As Li Jinglong filled Hongjun’s cup with a shallow splash of wine, as usual, Mergen caught his eye and mimed a cage with his hands. Li Jinglong nodded back at him.

After dinner, everyone dispersed. Lu Xu grabbed Hongjun’s hand—he wanted to talk more—but Mergen stopped him. “He just got home; let him rest.”

Lu Xu shot Mergen a withering look.

Hongjun turned to Lu Xu. “I’ll come wake you in the morning.”

“I’ll make you lunch—my mom’s dumplings,” Lu Xu said. “They’re really delicious.”

Watching them, Mergen was once again uncertain. Did Lu Xu like Hongjun like that? Even if he did, it wasn’t as if he could blame Hongjun for it. He felt a flare of irritation; he wanted to talk to Hongjun, too, but ever since he’d returned, Lu Xu had kept him all to himself. Mergen huffed away, frustrated.

Lu Xu lifted his hand to Hongjun’s brow, his spiritual energy pouring into Hongjun through his forehead. “Hongjun, may you have sweet dreams.”

They bade each other good night.

The Department of Exorcism was brightly lit once more. As the cool of the spring evening rolled in, Hongjun found his mind going again to Li Jinglong. He never did ask what innate ability Lu Xu was referring to when they spoke that afternoon. Meanwhile, Li Jinglong had resumed his position as everyone’s boss. He no longer made a point of looking after Hongjun the way he did when they were traveling.

Does he like me? Hongjun couldn’t help wondering. Li Jinglong was kind to everyone—whether it was A-Tai, Mergen, or Qiu Yongsi, he treated all the members of the Department of Exorcism well. He did seem a bit more attentive to Hongjun than the others, but perhaps that was because he truly saw him as a little brother. Li Jinglong had never mentioned liking any girls, but by his own admission, there were a lot of girls who liked him.

He didn’t come to Hongjun’s room to talk before bed that night either. After returning to the Department of Exorcism, Li Jinglong seemed to have turned back into the chief of before. He was nothing like the Li Jinglong who had chased Hongjun through the snow in the middle of the night, even tearing open his robes to bare the tattoo on his chest.

Sitting on his bed in a daze, Hongjun twirled a candle between his fingers as he debated whether to light another lamp. When everyone had dispersed after dinner, Li Jinglong had set off for the east wing to look at

some case files in the library. What were the chances he'd come back this way?

Hongjun waited a long time, his mind tangling itself into knots as he recalled the things Li Jinglong had said to him at the relay station, and the time he'd carefully applied medicine to Hongjun's ear in the hot spring. Perhaps it was Lu Xu's powers at work, but he couldn't help reminiscing about all the time he'd spent on the road with Li Jinglong as he tossed and turned.

By the time Li Jinglong finished organizing the case files, everyone had returned to their rooms; even the carp yao had dived into his pond. He padded down the corridor barefoot, his hair ribbon fluttering in the spring breeze.

A lamp was still lit in Hongjun's room—Li Jinglong made straight for his door.

Hearing his approaching footsteps, Hongjun suddenly grew nervous. Even he couldn't explain why he flipped over and pinched out the candle wick, extinguishing his lamp. The light in his room silently faded, leaving only the moonlight to cast Li Jinglong's towering shadow against the paper of Hongjun's door.

Li Jinglong came to a stop, and Hongjun's heart hammered in his chest.

"You going to bed?" Li Jinglong called quietly outside the door.

"Mm." Hongjun shrank into his blankets. Li Jinglong didn't move, as if there was more he wanted to say.

It was at that moment that a stumbling, drunken A-Tai crashed through the front doors and into the courtyard. Li Jinglong rushed over just in time to stop him from vomiting into the well; A-Tai turned and hurled into the carp yao's pond instead.

The carp yao had been sleeping soundly in his watery home when calamity struck. The moment he realized what had happened, he leapt out of the water and cursed at A-Tai with such ferocity that he woke everyone else. Hongjun bolted out of his room at the ruckus and found A-Tai lying next to the well, singing and sobbing in turns.

“Don’t mind him,” Ashina Adarvan said as he dragged A-Tai back to his room. “He’s just lovesick.”

“Lovesick?” Li Jinglong echoed in exasperation.

“Lovesick,” Mergen repeated thoughtfully.

Everyone went back to sleep, putting an end to the chaotic evening. Hongjun couldn’t resist sneaking a glance at Li Jinglong as he reached the threshold of his bedroom, only to find Li Jinglong looking back at him with a smile.

Heart aflutter, Hongjun stepped back into his room. He fell asleep that spring evening with a smile gently curving his lips.

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Chapter 77:
A Reckoning

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL spring day, ideal for an outing. Mergen was about to ask Lu Xu where he wanted to go when Li Jinglong shouted angrily, “Still thinking about running off to play? Do you want to get paid or not? Get to work!”

Mergen was flat broke, and now he had Lu Xu to provide for as well. Meanwhile, A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan had come to Chang’an for the express purpose of making money for their army. As for Hongjun, he had run away from home without so much as a copper coin on him.

Taking in their abashed faces, Li Jinglong couldn’t stop himself from quipping, “You’re kidding, right? It hasn’t even been a year and you’ve all become destitute?”

There was an awkward silence. “To be honest,” Qiu Yongsi began with an apologetic smile, “I’ve spent nearly everything my grandfather gave me on my travel expenses. Chief, could you lend me some money?”

Li Jinglong never expected that this gang of princes, who had once spent money like water, would become so reliant on their official salaries in a few short months. Didn’t they all hail from big, wealthy families? He was dearly tempted to mock them, but after a moment of consideration, decided it would be best not to get too far ahead of himself.

“Get to work,” Li Jinglong said finally. “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

Hongjun and Lu Xu were ignorant of the mortal world and its hardships, but Mergen, Qiu Yongsi, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan knew all too well that they couldn’t do anything without money. Thus, after breakfast, Li Jinglong dispatched Qiu Yongsi to the Imperial Court of Judicial Review to bring the load of case files that had piled up over the course of several months back to the Department of Exorcism. Upon his return, everyone settled down in the main hall and began to flip through the documents.

“What did you mean yesterday when you said Li Jinglong has some sort of innate ability?” Hongjun asked Lu Xu.

The two had settled down in a quiet corner. Neither of them had a firm grasp on the value of money, but since their superior had ordered them to read through the cases, they did as they were told, treating the activity as a bit of entertainment.

Lu Xu lowered his voice. “There are some things I’ve noticed. His guesses are almost always accurate. Even when his information is inadequate, he manages to figure out the truth.”

“It’s just good intuition, isn’t it?” Hongjun glanced over his shoulder. Li Jinglong was writing up a memorial while the others flipped through the huge pile of case files.

Lu Xu shook his head. “It’s impossible for his intuition to be correct every single time. Haven’t you seen it too? Even when he doesn’t have all the facts, his deductions are spot-on. It’s like he can see the future.”

Hongjun knew Li Jinglong was exceptional in many ways—he could make blind shots just by listening for his target’s movements on the wind, for example—but he had never considered the possibility that he could do what Lu Xu suggested.

“Maybe it’s a side effect of wielding the Sword of Wisdom?” Lu Xu guessed.

“Does the Sword of Wisdom usually have such an effect?” Hongjun wondered.

“The Sword of Wisdom, the Demon-Quelling Staff, the Thunderbolt Arrow, the Golden Sun Wheel, the Yao-Binding Cord, and the Umbral Bow… These are the six artifacts of the Immovable Wisdom King Acalanatha,” Lu Xu said softly. “Their express purpose is to destroy the…”

He trailed off into silence. Hongjun glanced down at his own chest before looking back up at him.

“How do you know all this?” Hongjun asked quietly.

Lu Xu spread his hands. “I just do. Don’t ask me how.”

“Those are Di Renjie’s things,” Hongjun whispered.

Lu Xu nodded. Recalling the statue of Acalanatha in the entrance hall, Hongjun thought that perhaps it was all true.

“Legend says Mara can only be exorcised when the six artifacts are brought together,” Lu Xu said. “But you don’t need to worry. There’s no way Li Jinglong’ll be able to gather them all.”

Gradually, Hongjun had come to realize that Lu Xu knew many things he and the others didn’t. Even Qiu Yongsi wasn’t privy to some of the information Lu Xu shared. But Lu Xu could never tell them the source of his knowledge. Perhaps through his many incarnations as the white deer, he had accrued a number of primordial memories.

“I’ll help him think of a way to gather them,” Hongjun said.

“Are you out of your mind?” Lu Xu’s voice rose sharply.

Li Jinglong couldn’t stand it anymore. “Can you two stop with the whispering? Lu Xu, you shouldn’t hog Hongjun’s attention all the time. No one else has been able to get a word in since he got back.”

“You guys should focus on the case files,” Mergen added.

“I can’t read.” Lu Xu tossed a handful of roasted beans into his mouth with a bored expression, as if to say, *What are you going to do about it?*

“I’ll teach you,” Hongjun interjected.

“Has anyone found anything?” Li Jinglong asked over him.

“A weaver reported that her loom moved in the middle of the night,” A-Tai said absently. He seemed to have suffered some major emotional blow last night and looked distinctly worse for wear. “She claims it’s haunted.”

“We’ll send someone to look at it tonight,” Li Jinglong said.

“A man-eating yao has appeared in Luoyang. They say that it attacks children and eats their brains,” Qiu Yongsi said.

Hongjun broke out into gooseflesh just listening.

“Why are they sending us cases from Luoyang now?” Li Jinglong asked, baffled.

“Only Chang’an has a Department of Exorcism,” Mergen said. “They have nowhere else to send them.”

Li Jinglong suddenly saw a very serious problem: If things went on like this, they would be responsible for dealing with all the yaoguai in the entire country. The minute something happened in Southern Yue, Central Shu, or any other region, the exorcists would have to travel day and night, rushing off to wherever supernatural activity was taking place. They would waste months on travel alone. He only had a handful of people at his disposal; how would he go about dispatching them?

“Here’s another,” Mergen said, handing a scroll to Li Jinglong. “A thousand-year-old jiangshi, a hopping corpse, has appeared on Mount Qingcheng. Do we take the case?”

“We never had so many cases before,” Li Jinglong murmured. “What’s going on?”

“Perhaps it’s Xie Yu’s doing,” A-Tai suggested.

“Not necessarily,” Qiu Yongsi said. “The Divine Land hasn’t been overrun by monsters yet, but they do appear from time to time. It’s just that no one’s ever cared to deal with them before.”

Hongjun suddenly recalled the large number of yaoguai that had escaped Chang’an the night they defeated the nine-tailed fox. “Could they be the giant fox’s underlings…?”

“It’s possible,” Mergen replied. “But regardless, they’re all our cases now.”

With so many yaoguai cropping up all over the country, just running from case to case would be enough to work them to death. And if they arrived on-site to find that it wasn’t a yaoguai after all, they would have to hurry straight back. They’d be exhausted in no time.

Li Jinglong had a feeling Xie Yu was lurking in the shadows somewhere, watching them with predatory eyes. They were both biding their time, setting down a piece at a time on the giant weiqi board between them to test the other’s reaction.

Xie Yu undoubtedly knew about the demon seed within Hongjun, as well as that Hongjun was in Chang’an. Given the yao king’s abilities, he

needed only order the yaoguai under his command to raise mayhem, and it would be enough to stretch the Department of Exorcism's forces impossibly thin. Once he managed to lure them away from their stronghold, they would be vulnerable to any trap he chose to lay here in the city.

With this thought in mind, Li Jinglong pronounced, "Set aside all cases outside Chang'an for now."

Ashina Adarvan was appalled. "So you guys'll only investigate cases that happen right here?! You don't care if a child's brain gets eaten?"

As Li Jinglong attempted to muster a response, A-Tai admonished Ashina Adarvan, "Haven't you realized the situation we're in?"

Everyone nodded solemnly. A-Tai continued, "We're flat broke, yet you're still talking back to our superior?!"

Li Jinglong nearly expired from anger. Qiu Yongsi hurriedly cut in, "Ah! How about this? Out of reverence for His Majesty, the Changshu District Magistrate, Zhang Xu, brought a generous gift to Chang'an for the noble consort's birthday, only for it to disappear from the Spring Shepherd's Inn…"

"He probably got drunk and had a run-in with a thief," Li Jinglong said.

"Agreed," Qiu Yongsi concurred.

"Wait!" Interest piqued, Hongjun asked, "The famous Zhang Xu?"

"Of course," Li Jinglong responded. "What other Zhang Xu is there?"

"As in 'Zhang Xu, who proved himself the sage of cursive script with three cups of wine'[11]—*that* Zhang Xu?!" Hongjun was stunned.

"He's always dead drunk," Li Jinglong remarked. "He won't pay you any mind, so don't get any ideas about meeting him."

"Yongsi," said A-Tai, struck by a bolt of inspiration. "Didn't your cousin write him a poem? Ask him for a piece of calligraphy in return; I'll sell it after his hundredth birthday…"

"He may very well outlive you," Qiu Yongsi said.

Although Li Jinglong had dismissed the incident out of hand, there was no more worthy case, no matter how they flipped through the files.

Perhaps it was because the Court of Judicial Review didn't dare report any major cases while the city was under such scrutiny—or perhaps, with so many yaoguai having fled Chang'an and so many nations sending emissaries to celebrate the noble consort's birthday, more news of supernatural events came from outside the capital.

In any case, they agreed to start with the incidents in Chang'an. Mergen and Lu Xu left to track down Zhang Xu, while A-Tai and Ashina Adarvan went to investigate the haunted loom at Daming Palace. As for Qiu Yongsi, Li Jinglong sent him to look into the man-eating yao in Luoyang. Soon everyone had their orders except Hongjun, as per usual.

Hongjun had wanted to go with Mergen and Lu Xu to catch a glimpse of the legendary Zhang Xu, but Li Jinglong paid him no mind. One after another, he sent everyone away until they were the only two remaining.

"So what are we doing?" Hongjun asked.

"I'm taking you out to eat the people's lifeblood," Li Jinglong answered with a smile.

When they were alone, Li Jinglong always seemed to be smiling faintly. "All right," Hongjun said, grinning in return.

"Let's go after I finish writing this memorial," Li Jinglong said.

Hongjun waited, staring into space in boredom. Yet ever since he'd realized he liked Li Jinglong, no time they spent together was completely boring. Hongjun watched Li Jinglong's hand holding the brush, then shifted his gaze to take in his arrow-straight posture before glancing up at his handsome profile. It was as if the longer he stared, the more he liked him.

He hadn't wanted to admit it, but Lu Xu was right: He would have to acknowledge his feelings eventually.

Propping himself up against the table, Hongjun watched as Li Jinglong wrote his memorial. Li Jinglong's handwriting was beautiful; Hongjun had always greatly admired it.

"Is it pretty?" Li Jinglong asked when he noticed Hongjun staring.

Hongjun hummed in the affirmative.

"How does it compare to Zhang Xu's calligraphy?"

“It’s like the difference between heaven and earth,” Hongjun answered, as honest as ever.

Li Jinglong had a powerful urge to flick the brush up and scribble on Hongjun’s face, as if hearing Hongjun scream aloud would soothe his pride. Before he could act rashly, a military official arrived.

“Chief Li,” the official said, “His Highness the crown prince requests your presence at Xingqing Palace.”

“Give me a moment to change my robes,” Li Jinglong responded, rising to his feet.

“You’re to go immediately,” the man said firmly. After a moment of thought, Li Jinglong threw on his outer robe and hurried out. Hongjun dashed out to the courtyard and told the carp yao to look after the house before following Li Jinglong into a carriage.

The military official spoke very little on their way. Li Jinglong studied him, his brow slightly furrowed. Hongjun knew he was running his calculations again, so he didn’t disturb him. Instead, he gazed out the window, marveling over Chang’an’s beauty. How many more years would he have to enjoy such sights?

As they passed Xingqing Palace’s main hall, Li Jinglong spotted a maidservant from the carriage window. He nudged Hongjun. “Go ask that woman to bring this memorial to the noble consort.”

The woman looked oddly familiar, though Hongjun wouldn’t have recognized her if Li Jinglong hadn’t pointed her out. He uttered a quick apology to the official and slipped out of the carriage.

The maidservant smiled as he ran up to greet her. “Exorcist Kong?”

Hongjun still couldn’t put a finger on where he’d seen her, but he nevertheless handed her the memorial and asked her to pass it along. She nodded and bowed to Hongjun, gracefully taking her leave.

“How did you know she would recognize me?” Hongjun asked, perplexed.

“She was part of the noble consort’s entourage when Her Grace visited the Department of Exorcism,” Li Jinglong said. “She was also

standing by the carriage when the noble consort asked to speak with you that night, after we left Gold Blossom's Fall."

Hongjun was still puzzling over what Li Jinglong might have possibly written to the noble consort as they entered the Eastern Palace and came to stand before the crown prince.

"Li Jinglong, is the Department of Exorcism so busy you won't come unless I send for you?"

Li Heng's hostility was clear as day. He had always been pleasant and polite in their previous interactions—to look so cross meant he was already quite angry.

Li Jinglong bowed. "I was planning on requesting an audience with Your Highness today. However, there were a few things I had yet to puzzle out, so I was delayed for some time."

Li Heng sat before a folding screen with a handful of his advisors at his side, who withdrew as the exorcists entered. Four letters lay on the desk before him. The first was from Geshu Han; the second was from Jia Zhou, the Governor of Gua Prefecture; the third was from Li Jinglong himself; and the last was an impeachment order issued by the Chancellery to the Ministry of War.

With a flick of his hand, Li Heng flung the documents toward Li Jinglong. "Read them yourself."

Hongjun's temper flared. Instead of eating the people's lifeblood, they were about to be scolded? He was on the verge of making an angry retort when Li Jinglong stopped him with a look.

"When I dispatched you to Hexi to investigate the border massacres, did I tell you to mobilize Geshu Han's troops?" Li Heng asked.

Glancing down at the military reports, Li Jinglong couldn't help but feel a flash of amusement.

"Not only did you mobilize Liang Prefecture's army," Li Heng continued, "you mobilized the soldiers under Jia Zhou's command at Yumen Pass—"

"That's my uncle," Hongjun interrupted.

Cursing silently, Li Jinglong was about to shush Hongjun when Li Heng replied coolly, “I am aware.”

“The noble consort told me to go look for him,” Hongjun added by way of explanation.

Li Heng fell silent.

Hongjun had learned by now that everyone feared the emperor. He had also learned that since the emperor doted on the noble consort, by invoking Yang Yuhuan, he could shut Li Heng up immediately. Lo and behold, Li Heng didn’t dare continue his tirade.

“General Geshu Han mobilized his troops of his own accord,” Li Jinglong said.

“That’s not what the imperial court thinks,” Li Heng countered. “You wrote that there were two hundred thousand fallen corpse ghosts rampaging through the border regions, but where are they now? The whole court considers your story pure fantasy. They’re all asking me how a confidant of the crown prince can mobilize Geshu Han’s cavalry of fifty thousand men!”

“Your Highness sent me to investigate because you believed me. Naturally, you are aware that the fallen-corpse-ghost army is not a fantasy. The Department of Exorcism is responsible for protecting the peace of Great Tang. It would have been impossible for us to do so without calling on these troops.”

Li Heng’s anger receded slightly. “Well then, now that the corpse-ghost crisis on the border has been resolved, have you any evidence?” he asked coldly.

“I do not.” Sensing that the worst was behind him, Li Jinglong continued, “Forgive my bluntness, but I would think it unwise to toss a monster before the morning court.”

“And why did you request Yardang as your reward?” Li Heng asked.

“It was a necessary measure for us to subdue them,” Li Jinglong responded, “and the only way to guarantee the corpse ghosts will not invade our lands for the next thousand years.”

Li Heng gave Li Jinglong a considering look. Finally, he said, “After quelling the corpse ghosts, you should have reported back to Chang’an at

once. Why did you delay your return for nearly three months?”

“Due to a matter concerning the fate of our great nation,” Li Jinglong said, serene as a cloudless day.

Hongjun started, but Li Jinglong motioned for him to stay calm.

“Explain,” Li Heng ordered.

“I can’t say any more now,” Li Jinglong responded. “This must wait until His Majesty is present. Hongjun, Your Highness, His Majesty, and myself—my story can only be told when we are all in attendance.”

Li Heng’s brow twisted into a knot as he stared at Li Jinglong in silence. At last, he said, “Chief Li, I am only trying to help you. Please do not misunderstand me.”

“This is the truth,” Li Jinglong said earnestly. “I dare not deceive Your Highness.”

“If you won’t speak, then I’m afraid I cannot help you.” Li Heng sighed deeply.

Li Jinglong felt a wave of dread as several eunuchs stepped forward to move aside the folding screen behind Li Heng, revealing Chancellor Yang Guozhong and Chief Eunuch Gao Lishi.

“This matter should have been brought before the court,” Yang Guozhong said placidly. “His Highness did not wish to call for a court session, however, so he allowed us to listen in instead. He swore that you had no selfish motives. Li Jinglong, it’s high time we had a proper chat.”

To everyone’s surprise, Li Jinglong smiled. “Indeed.”

However slow on the uptake Hongjun might be, even he could tell something was off.

“What we are doing right now is helping you save face,” Gao Lishi said. “Two hundred thousand fallen corpse ghosts massacring the border towns, a nine-colored deer in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang—these are not topics that may be broached before the imperial court. Even if you were to explain, no one would believe you.”

“The court is the court, and the supernatural is the supernatural,” Li Jinglong said, his voice hardening. “The Department of Exorcism is subject

to a different jurisdiction than other governmental offices. We each take care of our own affairs—what need is there for this intervention?”

“Because the Department of Exorcism has taken care of its affairs so well!” Yang Guozhong snapped. “Chief Li, lives are at stake. Over seven hundred and forty soldiers died at Yumen Pass; the military casualties in Liang Prefecture number over three thousand. You accomplished your objectives under the pretext of eradicating yao, then vanished in the aftermath. How do you expect His Majesty to address the grieving families of these fallen soldiers?!”

Li Jinglong said nothing as he covered the back of Hongjun’s hand with his own, signaling that he should keep quiet.

“Tell us everything you’ve discovered, from beginning to end,” Gao Lishi said. “However, I make no guarantee as to whether the officials of the court will believe your story.”

“Li Jinglong, speak,” Li Heng said. “Things have come to a head—what are you waiting for?”

After a pause, Li Jinglong replied, “I am waiting for a messenger.”

Li Heng’s frown deepened, while Gao Lishi and Yang Guozhong’s expressions both shifted. Li Jinglong could only hope his bad luck wouldn’t strike now—that the Son of Heaven happened to be with the noble consort, that his memorial would successfully reach her, and that the loving couple would take a moment from their busy schedules to glance at what he had written.

“Forget it,” Yang Guozhong declared. “Throw them into the imperial dungeons.”

Hongjun stared, aghast. Instead of eating delicious food, they were being thrown in jail?! He was so angry he couldn’t speak.

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Chapter 78:
I Love You So

BEFORE HONGJUN could fly into a rage, a voice called from outside the hall, “His Majesty summons Li Jinglong—”

Li Jinglong let out a silent breath: He’d won.

“My lords; Your Highness.” Li Jinglong inclined his head. “I will take my leave.”

No one said a word.

Yang Guozhong and Gao Lishi had planned to rake Li Jinglong over the coals today. They’d never expected the Son of Heaven, of all people, to save him in the nick of time.

Li Heng was equally shocked. Noting the crown prince’s expression, Li Jinglong realized Li Longji had no idea what had transpired here; the crown prince had withheld all information about this incident from his father. But the corpse-ghost debacle had widespread impact, and was now part of the power struggle between Geshu Han, Yang Guozhong, and Li Heng; the crown prince’s reluctance to report it was understandable.

If this matter only concerned the corpse ghosts, Li Jinglong might have let it be—but Mara was involved. One wrong step could bring about the total annihilation of humankind. Li Jinglong dared not make any decisions alone; he had no choice but to bypass the chain of command and report directly to Li Longji. The crown prince would of course resent him for it, but Li Jinglong couldn’t worry about that. He and Hongjun left the Eastern Palace and made their way to Gold Blossom’s Fall.

“Hongjun.” Li Jinglong stopped in his tracks within the corridor and turned to him. “Do you trust me?”

Startled, Hongjun nodded. Li Jinglong said, “No matter what I say or do, you must trust me.”

“Of course. What’s going on?” Hongjun asked.

Li Jinglong took a moment to find the words. “Whatever I say in front of His Majesty, Hongjun…”

Hongjun watched him in confusion. Li Jinglong looked back at him quietly. At last he said, “You just need to remember this: To me, you’re the most important—” A blush crept up Li Jinglong’s cheeks, the rest of the sentence unfinished. “Let’s go,” he said, urging Hongjun to walk faster.

Li Jinglong was flustered; even Hongjun could see it. Heart thumping madly, he quickened his pace to keep up with Li Jinglong, and they arrived together at Gold Blossom’s Fall.

Winter had departed, and spring was in full bloom. Fresh leaves unfurled on the branches of the divine ginkgo tree that served as the nation’s protector, and the peach trees that had been moved nearby filled the courtyard with their color.

Li Longji and Yang Yuhuan were seated on the couch, as always, accompanied by music. After Li Jinglong and Hongjun presented themselves, Li Longji invited them to take a seat and ordered the musician to pause as he sent for Li Heng.

Li Jinglong drew himself up to begin making his report when Li Longji said easily, “Let’s wait until the crown prince is here.”

Yang Yuhuan, clad in white, smiled sweetly at Hongjun. “Did you find your uncle?”

“I did.” Hongjun accepted the tea and pastries a eunuch brought over with an answering smile. “Unfortunately, I didn’t get to say goodbye to him before we left. We were in too much of a hurry.”

“You’ll have a chance to meet him again, I’m sure,” Yang Yuhuan said. “There’s no need to worry.”

“I was thinking I haven’t heard from you recently,” Li Longji commented. “If you hadn’t submitted this memorial, I wouldn’t even have known you went to Liang Prefecture.”

“I was running an errand for His Highness,” Li Jinglong said, somewhat abashed. “It’s fortunate I was there.”

Li Jinglong was hesitant to say anything too pointed about the crown prince’s orders, but the emperor merely asked some questions about the

local culture and people of Liang Prefecture, which Li Jinglong answered as well as he could. When Li Heng arrived, Li Longji cast Yang Yuhuan a glance. She rose gracefully and took her leave, and the atmosphere in Gold Blossom's Fall grew solemn.

"Li Jinglong." Li Longji ordered the attendants to leave before saying coolly, "The contents of your memorial were shocking indeed."

Hongjun was surprised by the change in Li Longji's tone the moment Yang Yuhuan left. Suddenly he was nervous again. Li Longji tossed the folded-up memorial onto the floor, where it fell open. Hongjun could vaguely make out the words, *Mara will descend upon the mortal world, bringing destruction and misery*. Shocked, he turned to look at Li Jinglong.

"Every word of it is true," Li Jinglong said.

He took a sip of tea before recounting everything—from the great calamity and the thousand-year recurrence of this cycle to the detailed history he'd heard from the corpse-ghost king during their trip to Hexi—while omitting every part of the story related to Hongjun.

At last, he said, "The demon seed of Mara has returned to the mortal world. The heavenly demon's reincarnation is inevitable."

Hongjun was stricken. He hadn't expected Li Jinglong to lay everything out before the emperor, keeping almost nothing back.

"You're claiming," Li Longji muttered, "that there's a demon seed of Mara, which will grow into a heavenly demon when the time is ripe?"

"Precisely." Li Jinglong had clearly come prepared for this discussion; he'd never had any intention of keeping this from the emperor.

"And where is this…demon seed now?" Li Longji asked.

"We are still investigating its whereabouts," Li Jinglong answered. "I believe I have a lead, though I cannot reveal it just yet."

"Li Jinglong…" A tremor had entered Li Heng's voice. "How can you make such absurd claims? What a load of alarmist nonsense!"

"Your Highness," Li Jinglong said, meeting his eyes, "does any part of my account seem unreasonable?"

Sometimes the truth was more convincing than any lie could be. Hongjun had to admit that Li Jinglong had approached this cleverly. No matter how bizarre the story was or how many twists and turns it contained, a truthful account that logically linked multiple strange events had the power to make people believe.

“I will eliminate the demon seed of Mara,” Li Jinglong said. “But chaos will surely befall Chang’an in the process. In this, I must request your support, Your Majesty.”

The world seemed to spin as Hongjun heard those words. To eliminate the demon seed of Mara—Li Jinglong had as good as promised to kill him. Hongjun felt he was seeing his future—his own death by Li Jinglong’s hand.

And yet Li Jinglong merely fixed him with a look, one Hongjun knew well: *Calm down. Whatever happens, I’m here.*

Hongjun remembered Li Jinglong’s warning and managed, with enormous difficulty, to settle the storm in his heart. He nodded.

“How do you plan to eliminate it?” Li Longji asked.

“The yao king, Xie Yu, is searching for the demon seed as well,” Li Jinglong said. “Once we find it, we need only wait, and the yao king will eventually show himself—he will attempt to seize the demon seed at all costs. When that time comes, I will slay Xie Yu with all the strength of the Department of Exorcism before purifying the demon seed with the heart lamp, burning it until nothing remains.”

“We fear you may not succeed,” Li Longji said.

“If I cannot succeed,” Li Jinglong said, “then no one can.”

All was silent for a moment. Li Jinglong continued, “Every member of my department is willing to give everything in this fight against the yao race—like Hongjun here, who is more important to me than anyone. They’ve entrusted their lives to me, but when facing the court—Your Majesty, Your Highness, even when the danger comes from our own side, we cannot disobey your commands. Nor can we ignore the misgivings of so many court officials. This is why I insisted on reporting to you in person, Your Majesty. This cannot leave Gold Blossom’s Fall; no one aside from the four of us here may know of it. I am asking for your trust.”

Hongjun's hand was lying on his knee; Li Jinglong covered it with his own and looked up at Li Longji's expression.

Li Longji watched them in silence.

Hongjun's heart was leaden in his chest. He knew Li Jinglong's words to be true—if Li Jinglong could not succeed in killing the demon seed, then no one could—but it was still agonizing to hear him say it. Yet he didn't pull his hand away; despite everything, at this moment, he had no one to rely on but Li Jinglong.

"Li Jinglong," Li Longji said, "do you know what you're doing?"

"I've thought it through carefully."

"Then we grant our permission."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Li Jinglong said.

Night had long since fallen by the time they departed Xingqing Palace. Li Jinglong and Hongjun walked slowly through a darkened alley, Hongjun in front, Li Jinglong following a few steps behind. Both were silent, sunk in their own thoughts.

"Hongjun," Li Jinglong said at length, "I have something to tell you."

"I'm tired; I don't feel like talking."

Li Jinglong closed the distance in a few steps. "The crown prince summoned us out of the blue. I wanted to explain things to you last night, or even tonight—"

Hongjun cut him off. "I'm going back."

He trusted Li Jinglong. But the chief's speech at Gold Blossom's Fall had been too great a shock; he had no idea what to do, or how to respond. The bricks concealing the Department of Exorcism's door flew aside, and Hongjun strode briskly through.

"You promised to trust me, no matter what I said!" Li Jinglong called behind him.

Hongjun glanced back at Li Jinglong, his gaze desolate. Rationally, he knew what Li Jinglong had said was true, but his heart ached fit to break.

“You’re back!” the carp yao exclaimed in the courtyard. “Have you eaten? Where did you go?”

Hongjun sped past him. Lu Xu peeked his head out from Mergen’s doorway, calling his name, but Hongjun swept into his room and shut the door.

Li Jinglong was half a step behind him. Through the door, he said, “Hongjun, listen to me—”

He didn’t open the door, and Li Jinglong didn’t force his way in. Hongjun’s room was dark, with no lamps lit; Li Jinglong’s figure cast a long silhouette on the thin paper.

Hongjun stared at that silhouette in silence. Mergen, A-Tai, and the others poked their heads out into the corridor, peering at Li Jinglong. He waved to A-Tai, then beckoned him over and whispered some words in his ear.

A-Tai cast him a dubious look. He hurried to his room to fetch his barbat, a hand pressed to his forehead.

You okay? Mergen mouthed.

Li Jinglong nodded. Lu Xu was about to call for Hongjun, but Li Jinglong held a hand up for silence. He looked back at Mergen, his fingers forming the shape of a cage.

Mergen understood at once. He pulled the confused Lu Xu over and whispered a hasty explanation into his ear. Lu Xu shook Mergen off and turned to Li Jinglong with a look of suspicion.

Within his room, Hongjun lay on the bed. The shadow at the door was gone; Li Jinglong seemed to have left. He tossed and turned, thinking about what he’d heard today. He understood, in his heart of hearts, that Li Jinglong had said those words to protect him.

“I know what I told the emperor today upset you.” Li Jinglong spoke up again outside the door.

Hongjun’s mind was a mess. “I said I don’t want to talk about it! Go away!”

“But you only took to heart what I said about Mara,” Li Jinglong continued, undeterred. “There was something else I said to His Majesty:

You’re the most important person in my life.”

Everyone—Mergen, Lu Xu, the carp yao, A-Tai, and Ashina Adarvan—was dumbfounded upon hearing these words. The carp yao’s mouth fell open. Mergen grinned and pumped his fist at Li Jinglong. He didn’t know what had happened, but he was cheering Li Jinglong on.

Realizing everyone’s eyes were on him, Li Jinglong suddenly felt self-conscious. He flapped a hand to shoo them off.

Hongjun still hadn’t said a word. Li Jinglong sat down cross-legged outside Hongjun’s door and settled A-Tai’s barbat on his lap. “Hongjun, do you know what I respect about His Majesty?”

There was only silence from the other side of the door. Moonlight soaked the paper, lending it a snowy white glow.

“Ten years ago,” Li Jinglong went on, “when Consort Wu died of illness, His Majesty fell in love with Noble Consort Yang at first sight and made her his consort. This caused a great stir within the court—Noble Consort Yang was once his daughter-in-law, after all. Yet His Majesty brushed aside all objections because he believed they were meant to be together. Not even an earthshaking catastrophe could sway him from his course.”

Hongjun sat up on his bed, lost as he stared at Li Jinglong’s silhouette on the door. Why was he saying all this?

Li Jinglong sighed softly, as if those words had been a weight off him. He seemed to steady his resolve as he said, “Let me play you a song, Hongjun.”

Hongjun was flabbergasted. He was no longer mad at Li Jinglong. It occurred to him that everyone was likely still awake; they probably assumed the two of them had fought. The thought was mortifying. He had just slid off the bed to let Li Jinglong in when he heard notes flowing from the barbat.

“*The mountains have their trees, and the trees have their branches…*”

Li Jinglong’s voice was rich and deep, nothing like A-Tai’s clear tones. Yet his singing seemed to possess some miraculous power: It pierced Hongjun straight through the heart.

“*I love you so, and yet you do not know*.” Li Jinglong’s cheeks colored as he strummed the strings. Light materialized at his fingertips and flowed through the barbat with the music.

Hongjun’s breath caught. This was…a love song!

He looked around in disbelief, slightly dizzy, before fixing his eyes again on Li Jinglong’s silhouette.

“*I drift down the river on my boat this blissful night, my prince beside me; oh, what a sweet day is today. I deserve neither his kindness nor his grace… Since meeting him, my heart is in disarray. The mountains have their trees, and the trees have their branches; I love you so, and yet you do not know*.”

Hongjun sat down on the floor, utterly speechless.

“Song of the Yue Boatman” was meant to be sung by a Yue woman in a sweet, lilting voice, but Li Jinglong strummed the strings at a rapid tempo and sang the lyrics grandly and with great aplomb. It was like he was inching forward, step by step, leaving Hongjun helpless against his advances.

Everyone in the yard gaped at Li Jinglong as he changed keys and started in on another song.

“By the heavens, I want nothing more than to fall in love with you, and for our love to never cease. When mountains crumble and streams run dry; when thunder rumbles in winter and snow falls in summer; when the heavens and earth merge into one—”[12]

Li Jinglong strummed the strings once more. “*Only then shall I cease to love you*.”

The music faded. Li Jinglong gazed at the door, a crooked, childlike grin on his face. “Hongjun, you like Gege, don’t you?”

Hongjun inched backward on the floor. Li Jinglong gave him no time to consider his response: “I know you like me, Hongjun. Tell me. Tell me you like me. You said it before—you said you liked me so much. Say it again, Hongjun.”

“You… You’re the worst, Chief!” Hongjun yelped. “You can’t do this!”

“Tell me you like me.” Li Jinglong set the barbat down and knelt outside Hongjun’s door, hands on his knees as he said earnestly, “Tell me you like me, Hongjun, and I’ll come in.”

“I—” Hongjun realized dimly that his chest was heaving. The feeling that seized him now was the same as when he’d plummeted off the cliff at Yaojin Palace wrapped in Li Jinglong’s arms.

Li Jinglong was like a great general defending a city under siege. He was a lone shadow on the other side of the door, yet it was as if he stood at the head of a massive army as he made his vow to all the known and nameless gods and deities—to the heavens, the earth, the mountains and the oceans, to all mortal beings in the Divine Land. He galloped out, his army surging at his back, conquering cities and demolishing walls in the blink of an eye.

“Hongjun, tell me you like me,” Li Jinglong said with a grin, “and we’ll be together. You’ll never leave me, and I’ll never leave you.”

“I…I…” Hongjun stammered. “I…”

The words lodged in his throat. Blood rushed to Hongjun’s head; he felt faint. He couldn’t stop shaking—he could barely breathe. Everything he yearned for was just on the other side of this door. His voice became small and distant, but the words that spilled out were earnest, from his heart. “I… I like…you.”

“Who do you like?” Li Jinglong asked from outside the door.

“You bastard!” Hongjun roared, his cheeks blazing. “Li Jinglong!”

“Hey,” Li Jinglong answered with a smile as he pushed the door open and walked in.

Hongjun was a nervous wreck. Li Jinglong took another step forward, and Hongjun squeaked, “What are you doing?!”

Li Jinglong took another step—then another—toward Hongjun, who scrambled back into a corner of the room. Li Jinglong got down on one knee, then on both, as he caged him in.

Just as a wave of awkwardness threatened to drown Hongjun, Li Jinglong grabbed his chin and studied him carefully. “Don’t move,” he whispered. “Be good.”

Then he tilted his head and kissed him.

A clap of thunder sounded in Hongjun's ears; his mind went blank in an instant. Li Jinglong's mouth was scorching and soft at once. The moment their lips touched, the world around them fell silent on that spring night. A ray of white light seemed to pierce the darkness to illuminate Hongjun's soul.

When they separated, they gazed at each other in dumbfounded silence. Still kneeling, Li Jinglong gazed at Hongjun, his eyes dancing with mirth. "What am I?"

"You're a bastard," Hongjun said.

"Come again?"

"You're a—*mmph*—"

Li Jinglong silenced him with another kiss. Hongjun opened his eyes wide, looking first at Li Jinglong, then over his shoulder through the open door. He shoved Li Jinglong away, his face aflame.

"Focus," Li Jinglong said, his brow furrowing.

A large audience had gathered outside. Hongjun was so embarrassed he thought he might die. "Stop looking at us!"

"Congratulations!" Mergen called.

"You should give out some money, Chief!" A-Tai said, "You're supposed to give out red envelopes on auspicious occasions."

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“He’s right,” Ashina Adarvan said. “Twenty taels of silver for each of us, maybe?”

“Hongjun’s right, Chief,” Lu Xu said. “You *are* a bastard.”

“Keep it up and I’ll dock your pay!” Li Jinglong bellowed in anger.

Everyone made themselves scarce, leaving only the carp yao, who gaped at Hongjun, dazed and distraught.

“Zhao Zilong,” Hongjun snapped. “Close the door!”

“Hongjun…”

“Not now!”

The carp yao shut the door and scampered away.

When Hongjun turned to look at Li Jinglong, he was so nervous he thought he might be sick. He jumped to his feet as if to run out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Li Jinglong asked.

“I… I’m going out for some fresh air.”

Hongjun shoved his feet into his clogs and ran out in nothing but a thin underrobe, Li Jinglong right on his heels. He wandered around in the yard in a daze. Li Jinglong stayed a few steps behind him, following him this way and that.

“You…” Hongjun turned around and nearly collided with Li Jinglong’s chest.

“Should I carry you?” Li Jinglong said.

“No!”

“Everyone can hear you, you know.”

Hongjun went mute.

“Come with me.” Li Jinglong caught Hongjun’s hand. Hongjun’s heart thudded frantically whenever their skin touched; he tried to fling Li Jinglong’s hand away, but Li Jinglong merely tightened his grip as they leapt up onto the roof. Hongjun, distracted, nearly slipped and fell, so Li Jinglong wrapped an arm around his waist as they darted across rooftops and vaulted over walls until they at last reached the soaring Goose Pagoda.

Hongjun felt like he was walking in a dream. He hadn’t yet digested this shocking development and wanted nothing more than to get away from Li Jinglong as quickly as possible and calm down by himself. But Li Jinglong refused to let him go, sticking to him as if worried he’d lose track of Hongjun the moment he turned around.

“I…” Hongjun turned to face Li Jinglong, emotions roiling in his heart. He had a million things he wanted to say, but no way to put them into words.

“Look,” Li Jinglong said, “Chang’an is so beautiful tonight.”

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Chapter 79:
Grand Return

HONGJUN LOOKED out from Goose Pagoda. Late-spring peach blossoms fluttered in the wind as a warm breeze blew through the moonlit city of Chang'an. Below them, the tiles of a thousand different rooftops spread out in rows like fish scales glinting in the moonlight, and a flute song drifted in from a distance.

Li Jinglong wrapped his arms around Hongjun from behind. Hongjun stiffened, afraid to move an inch. Li Jinglong murmured in his ear, "Don't you like me?"

"N-no…" Hongjun's heart began to pound again. He tilted his head to look back at Li Jinglong, heart trembling under his earnest gaze. Li Jinglong closed his eyes, leaned in, and pressed a kiss to Hongjun's lips.

Hongjun finally understood the appeal of kissing. It was like every flower in the moonlit city was blooming at once, a bursting vitality that swirled through the air around them.

When they parted a long time later, the corners of Li Jinglong's eyes were curved in a smile. Hongjun's breathing was ragged, but he had managed to gather himself. A surge of desire rushed through him, and he turned in Li Jinglong's arms so they were face to face. He closed his eyes and leaned in for another kiss.

Li Jinglong's own breath quickened at Hongjun's reciprocation, feelings stirring in him he could hardly manage to suppress. Love crashed over him like a tidal wave, collapsing a thousand buildings in its wake. The kiss awoke a hunger in both of them, and when they next drew apart, Hongjun was red to the tips of his ears. He hastily ducked away to hide his face. Li Jinglong didn't hide at all, watching Hongjun with a smile.

Hongjun loved Li Jinglong's smile the most. When he smiled, he looked like a carefree young man, every wile, stratagem, or thought of subterfuge erased from his handsome visage.

At this thought, a hint of ire returned to Hongjun's brows. "Why di__"

"I didn't want to lose you," Li Jinglong said, taking Hongjun's hand. He leaned in and tenderly pressed their noses together. "I'm sorry, Hongjun. I hurt you with what I said earlier today. But facing our fears head-on is the only way to defeat them."

"You're right," Hongjun murmured. "It's true—I have to face it, one way or another. Maybe this is the trial fate has set me."

Li Jinglong flashed him a relieved smile. "I'll face it with you. We'll do it together."

Suddenly Hongjun saw what Li Jinglong meant with perfect clarity, as if he could read his mind. If he wanted to free himself of this burden, he first had to face himself and his fate. Yet Li Jinglong's words were also a promise: No matter when or where Hongjun fought this battle, he would be at Hongjun's side.

"But I wasn't asking about that." Newly embarrassed, Hongjun asked, "I meant…why do you like me?"

"Why do *you* like *me*?" Li Jinglong turned the question back on him.

Hongjun was stumped. *What an awkward question!*

In days to come, he would think back often on this conversation. Every time he recalled how he'd asked such a silly thing, he'd be overcome by the urge to dig a hole and bury himself.

But this was the first time in his life he had fallen in love. He was experiencing nearly every first with Li Jinglong. He as yet had no notion how changeable were mortal hearts, nor how the spring flush of romance was as fleeting as a cloud scudding across the sky. Nor did he understand that many things, such as love, had no logical explanation. In his innocence, he asked Li Jinglong this question with full sincerity, and Li Jinglong responded in kind.

And so, after pondering the question at length, Hongjun was disappointed to find that he couldn't produce a response. "I don't know."

"I don't know either," Li Jinglong replied.

Hongjun couldn’t help but laugh; Li Jinglong couldn’t help but lean in to kiss him again.

Restless with nerves, Hongjun searched for another topic to stall him. “When did you… Um, when did you start…start liking me?”

Holding back his laughter, Li Jinglong pretended to consider the question. “Hmm, let me think.”

Hongjun carefully pulled Li Jinglong’s robe aside to reveal his sturdy chest, recalling that frigid night in Liang Prefecture when Li Jinglong had chased after him and yanked open his robes in the snow. Looking down, Li Jinglong grasped his unspoken question.

“I remember now,” he said. “It was when you were milking me in broad daylight.”

Hongjun burst out laughing. Li Jinglong caught his wrist with a smile and dragged him closer for a kiss. Finding it all a little strange still, Hongjun pushed his face away. “No more!”

“Then when we get back—”

Hongjun’s eyes widened, and he whipped his head around. Both of them went still.

Dark clouds had covered the moon, and a torrent of black energy was rolling toward them from the mountains in the distance. It crested the city wall and flooded into Chang’an in a great wave.

All the lights of Chang’an flickered and dimmed. Every bell hanging from Goose Pagoda moved without a breeze, tinkling in chorus as something inside the pagoda gave off a gentle glow that expanded to cover the building. The black energy swept over the pagoda toward the northwest of the city, disappearing silently into the distance as quickly as it had come.

“What was that?” Hongjun wondered briefly if he’d imagined the whole thing.

Li Jinglong frowned. “Xie Yu has returned…or perhaps he’s always been here, lying in wait for us.”

He tightened his grip on Hongjun’s hand. Together they stared in the direction the black energy had vanished, unable to determine exactly where

it had gone. Perhaps it had flooded into Xingqing Palace, or Daming Palace, further distant.

“I can absorb his demonic energy,” Hongjun said.

“You mustn’t,” Li Jinglong said. “Even if Chang’an—”

He stopped and looked at Hongjun uneasily. Hongjun blinked back at him, confused.

“Just—trust me. I can protect you and eliminate Xie Yu at the same time,” Li Jinglong said. “To live is to make choices, yes; but I’ll do everything in my power to ensure we never have to make this kind of choice.”

Hongjun didn’t know then what Li Jinglong meant, nor how much resolve was contained within those words. So he simply smiled. “Okay.”

In the furthest depths of Daming Palace, on the seventh floor of an underground complex, a black array spat flames as dark energy funneled in from all directions, pouring into its center like a waterfall. The demonic energy twisted into the shape of one creature after another, as if countless resentful spirits were entrapped within the center of the array: Foxes snarled, sharp-toothed fish snapped their jaws, the beguiling figure of a jade pipa yao emitted a pained scream, the dark lady and the plague god released waves of dark energy, flickering from form to form without cease.

“I summon you with the most ancient curse of the Divine Land. Shackled by endless fate, in your boundless sorrow, leave the natural meridians and use this demonic energy to return to life. You will take Mara as your master, bound for all eternity…”

A man in scholarly robes sauntered down the stairs, a purplish-black glow emanating from his palm. He recited the incantation under his breath as he drew closer to the array.

“Master of the heart lamp, the embodiment of Acalanatha…” the man murmured as he looked into the array, his back to the entrance to the underground complex. “Di Renjie, you’ve chosen the wrong man.”

Late that night on Mount Li, the guards of Huaqing Palace dozed in the corridor with their halberds loose in their arms. The water of the hot spring's pool rippled, reflecting the night sky above, before abruptly flashing silver.

One of the guards, more awake than the others, noticed the change. "What's that?"

Huaqing Pool had become a mirror. The silver light within it flared; with a loud hum, a blue-black monster exploded out of the pool.

Water surged in all directions, transforming the pool into a roiling lake nearly a third of a mile in circumference. The guards cried out in fear and ran for safety as a monstrous fish emerged from the lake's surface. Spreading six great wings, it traced a wide arc through the air before transforming, with a graceful twist of its body, into a man in black robes.

A second later, a dripping black-and-gold bird followed suit, sending a curtain of fine droplets through the air as it shook water from its feathers with a flick of its colossal wings. The bird, too, took human form, becoming a man with his muscular torso bared who flitted away alongside the first black-robed figure.

When they were gone, the waters of Huaqing Pool roared back into themselves, receding to their original levels. The guards stared at each other, hearts pounding in fright.

On the rooftop of Huaqing Palace, Yuan Kun sat with a strip of black cloth over his eyes, one foot dangling over the curving eaves. Qing Xiong stood at the peak of the hall, gazing out at Daming Palace in the distance.

"Our most urgent task must be finding the fake heavenly demon Xie Yu created," Qing Xiong said.

"It's too late," Yuan Kun muttered. "I see countless threads of fate joining to create a single future. One year from now, the Central Plains will become a hell on earth."

"Shall we try the east?" Qing Xiong asked grimly.

"It's too late, Qing Xiong. Rather than waste our time tracing the origins of the demonic energy, we may as well gather the remnants of the yao race. The ghost king is awake, though Yu Zaoyun still sleeps. Including

you and me, we have the kun, the peng, the foxes, and the ghosts. With the power of the heart lamp and Acalanatha's six artifacts on our side, if we cast a thousand-yao array within the year, we may yet stand a chance against Xie Yu and Mara."

"The yao have gone without a ruler for a long time," Qing Xiong countered. "You and I alone are not enough to command them. I'll go ahead to Luoyang; you stay in Chang'an. We still have Chong Ming."

Yuan Kun sighed. "These events have been decided by fate. Why persist in these fruitless struggles?"

But Qing Xiong had already spread his wings and taken off toward the east, leaving the kun and his warning behind.

In the wee hours of the morning, Li Jinglong gingerly pushed open the door to the Department of Exorcism. He and Hongjun tiptoed in.

Moving silently, Hongjun trod barefoot toward his room. Li Jinglong followed, snapping a sprig of peach blossoms off a tree in the courtyard as they passed and handing it to Hongjun.

Hongjun accepted it, only to poke Li Jinglong with its tip. Expression flat, Li Jinglong made a grab for Hongjun's wrist, but Hongjun darted to his door, pushing Li Jinglong back toward his own room—he still wasn't quite used to the change in their relationship. Reluctant to go, Li Jinglong tried to squeeze his way into Hongjun's room until Hongjun gave him a pleading look and another poke with the branch. Li Jinglong finally stepped back and out of the way.

Before Hongjun could close the door, Li Jinglong beckoned him once more. Setting one hand on the branch Hongjun was still holding, he wrapped the other around the back of his neck to pull him in for a kiss. Face crimson, Hongjun shoved him away, afraid they'd wake the others. He fled inside and shut the door firmly behind him.

Li Jinglong stood before the door a moment longer before creeping back to his own room.

Hongjun didn't bother to light a lamp before collapsing into bed, heart galloping wildly in his chest. Everything had happened far too

quickly. It still felt like a dream—he couldn’t believe it, even now.

He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth, recalling the warmth of Li Jinglong’s body, the firm breadth of his chest, that burning kiss with nothing held back—it enraptured him like nothing else. A whole host of emotions wove together inside him. All that he wanted was right at his fingertips, yet he was afraid to get too close, lest he be burned to ash by the blazing fire of the heart lamp like a moth throwing itself into the flames.

What is Li Jinglong doing right now?

Hongjun gathered his blankets to his chest and sat up in bed. They had just parted, but Hongjun missed him already. *Ahhh, why did I have to send him away?* There was still so much he wanted to say.

Li Jinglong made his way back to his room, shut the door, and heaved a long sigh. He stood dejectedly for a while, then rifled through his things until he found a vase for the flowering branch. He silently slipped down the corridor and set the vase outside Hongjun’s door.

Moments after he walked away, it occurred to him that Hongjun might trip on the vase when he got up in the morning, so he went back and retrieved it, laughing at himself as his fingers brushed the petals. He returned to his room and climbed into bed, raising the blooms to his face as he spun the branch this way and that between his fingers.

Hongjun lay on his side, limbs wrapped around his blankets the same way he had wrapped them around Li Jinglong every night while traveling. But no matter how he tried, he couldn’t fall asleep. His chest felt tight, and his stomach had twisted itself into knots. Head dizzy and aching, he tossed and turned.

A few hours past midnight, Li Jinglong stepped outside, bare-chested, took a ladleful of water from the well, and poured it over his back.

Close to dawn, he came out again, took another scoop of water, and poured it over his back again.

Fog rolled in with the dawn. Li Jinglong got dressed and walked out the door, disappearing into the city. The Department of Exorcism still slumbered, but Hongjun lay with his eyes open, not having slept a wink.

Every memory he'd ever shared with Li Jinglong ran through his mind on a loop. In all his sixteen years, Hongjun had never greeted the day so exhausted. He was always one to fall asleep the instant his head hit the pillow, but that night, he hadn't slept a moment even when the sun peeked over the horizon.

After who knew how long, he overheard Lu Xu and Mergen talking in the courtyard and blearily stumbled out of bed.

"Good morning, Madam Chief," Ashina Adarvan said.

"Morning, Madam," Mergen added.

Hongjun had no words.

"Madam, the chief bought you cherry biluo," A-Tai called.

Lu Xu, sitting at the table, pressed a hand to his forehead, choking down laughter.

"Don't call me Madam!" Hongjun wailed.

Standing outside his door, Zhao Zilong gave him a pitying look as he rubbed his hands together like a hapless fly. "Hongjun…"

Seeing a washbasin set out with hot water prepared, Hongjun said gratefully, "Zhao Zilong, you're the best."

"It was my second-in-command," the carp yao mumbled.

Hongjun fell silent yet again.

"Can I have one, Madam?" Even Lu Xu couldn't resist—there were only two cherry biluo on the table, and they were too tempting. There was even tea.

"Lu Xu, I'm gonna beat you up," Hongjun said flatly as he brushed his teeth. "But you can have a cherry biluo."

Lu Xu whooped with joy.

"I'll buy you as many as you want," Mergen said hastily.

Lu Xu looked at him. "Aren't you broke?"

Mergen shut his mouth.

"Where's the chief?" Hongjun asked Zhao Zilong.

Li Jinglong had taken a case early that morning and already left to investigate. After informing Hongjun of this, the carp yao ventured, “Hongjun, are you two…?”

Everyone had heard Li Jinglong’s confession yesterday. Hongjun steeled himself and murmured, “Mm.”

“Mm?!” The carp yao jumped up as if he’d been struck by lightning.

“Mm!”

“Mmmmmmmm?!”

The carp yao would have run away sobbing if only he had anywhere else to go. Tail shimmying behind him, he dove into the pool and sank to the bottom.

“Zhao Zilong!” Hongjun yelled. “Get back here. I think we need to talk.”

The carp yao popped his head out. Hongjun crouched by the pond, munching on his cherry biluo. He fed the carp yao some of his fallen crumbs; Zhao Zilong opened his mouth for the offering.

“Why do you hate the chief so much?” Hongjun asked.

“His Sword of Wisdom is meant to kill you! That’s your fated calamity!”

Hongjun looked intently at the carp yao and fed him a cherry. The carp yao ate it, then spat out the pit with a *plop*.

“I know,” Hongjun said quietly. “But I like him.”

He glanced up; Lu Xu was standing in the corridor. He smiled as he caught Hongjun’s eyes.

“Lu Xu is right,” Hongjun said. “And Jinglong is right too. We all have to face ourselves sooner or later.”

The carp yao blew bubbles but said nothing.

“I am Mara, and you are a carp,” Hongjun said. “No one can say what’ll happen in the future. But at the very least, I’m happy for now.”

Hongjun patted Zhao Zilong’s scaly head. “Dad used to say being a yaoguai is hard. Even cultivating for only a century, you’ll face all sorts of

troubles, large and small. If you want to cultivate into a dragon, there'll be thousands, even tens of thousands of tribulations awaiting you."

He sighed. "The chief said he likes me. He wants to face my tribulations with me. We'll survive together—or else we'll be ground to dust together."

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN
Legend of Exorcism
VOLUME 4

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CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

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Character & Name Guide

HISTORICAL PERIOD

Legend of Exorcism is set during the Tianbao era (742–756 AD), the third regnal period of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang. The Tianbao era saw the decline of the Tang dynasty, commonly regarded as the pinnacle of imperial Chinese civilization.

Many of the characters who appear in *Legend of Exorcism* are fictionalized versions of real historical figures contemporary to the setting, including Emperor Xuanzong himself, Li Longji, as well as Noble Consort Yang Yuhuan and Right Chancellor Yang Guozhong. The main members of the Department of Exorcism are fully fictional, though some of their family members are real historical figures.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

KONG HONGJUN : A half-yao boy from Yaojin Palace who is sent on a mission to expel the yao king of Chang'an.

LI JINGLONG : Formerly a commandant of the Longwu Guard, an ordinary mortal who becomes the chief of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

THE DEPARTMENT OF DEMONIC EXORCISM

ZHAO ZILONG : A carp yao and Hongjun's closest companion.

MERGEN : A Shiwei tribesman with the ability to transform into a gray wolf.

TIGRA YAZDEGERD á (A-TAI): A Persian prince and last surviving descendant of the House of Sasan, as well as a disciple of Persian Zoroastrianism.

QIU YONGSI : A Jiangnan scholar from West Lake sent to Chang'an to build his courage.

LU XU : A young scout from the border regions with the ability to transform into a white deer.

ASHINA ADARVAN : A-Tai's friend and loyal follower.

TURANDOKHT : A-Tai's fiancée.

YAOJIN PALACE

CHONG MING : Leader of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's adoptive father; a phoenix.

QING XIONG : One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace; a peng.

KONG XUAN : One of the three yao kings of Yaojin Palace and Hongjun's birth father; a peacock.

CHANG'AN

DI RENJIE : Statesman and founder of the Great Tang Department of Demonic Exorcism (deceased).

THE DUCHESS OF GUO : Yang Yuhuan's elder sister.

EMPEROR XUANZONG (LI LONGJI): The reigning emperor of Great Tang.

FENG CHANGQING : A general of Great Tang and Li Jinglong's elder cousin.

GAO LISHI : Chief Eunuch.

HU SHENG : Captain of the Longwu Guard and Li Jinglong's former superior.

HUANG YONG : Deputy Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review.

LI HENG : The crown prince of Great Tang.

QIN WU : Li Jinglong's former subordinate in the Longwu Guard.

YANG GUOZHONG : Right Chancellor and Yang Yuhuan's cousin.

YANG YUHUAN : Beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong, also known as Noble Consort Yang.

LIANG PREFECTURE

GESHU HAN : The military governor of Hexi and Duke of Liang.

LIU FEI : The king of the fallen corpse ghosts.

QIN LIANG : The prefect of Liang Prefecture, working under Geshu Han.

QIN XUAN : Qin Liang's daughter.

ZHANG HAO : An officer of the Hexi Patrol stationed in the capital of Liang Prefecture.

OTHER

JIA YUZE : Hongjun's late mother.

JIA ZHOU : Hongjun's maternal uncle, the Governor of Gua Prefecture.

XIE YU : A black jiao who escaped from the Dragon-Quelling Tower, formerly thought to be the yao king of Chang'an.

YUAN KUN : A yao known as the divine kun and a friend of Qing Xiong.

Name Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: Affectionate diminutive. A suffix meaning “son” or “child.” Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

-LAO: A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.

-SHI: A suffix attached to the surname of a woman to denote her maiden name.

Family

DI/DIDI: A word meaning “younger brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

ERGE: A word meaning “second brother.”

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIUJIU: A word meaning “maternal uncle.”

MEI/MEIMEI: A word meaning “little sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

SAOZI: A word meaning “elder brother’s wife.” It can also be used to address the wife of an unrelated male peer.

Other

SHIFU: A word for “master” or “teacher.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

XIONGDI: A word meaning “brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

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Glossary

DRAGONS: The long (/ “dragon”), or zhenlong (/ “true dragon”), is a legendary creature that features prominently in Chinese mythology. Commonly depicted as a horned, snakelike creature with four legs, it is an auspicious symbol of the divine and historically associated with the emperor and imperial power.

According to one myth, the jiao ( ) or jiaolong (/ “flood dragon”), a variety of hornless aquatic dragon, can transform into a “true” dragon by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

According to another, a carp can transform into a dragon if it swims upstream against the current and leaps over the falls of the Yellow River at the Dragon Gate.

Dragons are said to have reproduced with a number of other species, resulting in the nine dragon’s sons. The third son, Yazi, is a hybrid with a jackal; the fifth son, Suanni, has lionlike features; and the sixth son, Baxia, is the offspring of a true dragon and an azure dragon.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his obligations, then he would lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and so on.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic ranks, with rank one being the highest. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. The imperial examination was one path to becoming a court official, the other being referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official.

SABER/SWORD GLARE: An energy attack released from a bladed weapon's edge.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun ( ) and po ( ) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls that represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms that remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but Daoism commonly features three hun and seven po.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians, similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing. The appearance of the acupuncture points can also indicate a person's health; for example, darkness of the Yintang point between the brows portends an ill fate or even death.

TRUE FIRE OF SAMADHI: The true fire of Samadhi is a magical technique used by various fictional characters in Chinese literature including Red Boy and Sun Wukong from *Journey to the West* and Jiang Ziya from *The Investiture of the Gods*. Its primary characteristics are that it is unquenchable by water and can be shot from the eyes, nose, and mouth.

YAO/YAOGUAI: Living creatures and inorganic objects that have gained higher consciousness through absorbing the energy of the natural world and years of spiritual cultivation. Yao who have attained sufficiently high levels of cultivation can assume human form.

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About the Author

Fei Tian Ye Xiang (Arise Zhang) is a Chinese novelist who has been active since 2008. A romantic who crafts fantasy worlds suffused with eastern mythology, he has published a number of books in places such as Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and Germany. Many of his works, including *Legend of Exorcism* and *Dinghai Fusheng Records*, have received manhua and popular animated adaptations. He considers writing to be the act of bringing boundless adventure to the mundane life of the real world, allowing his readers to follow his characters in exploring the endless possibilities of time and space. He hopes every world will leave his readers with everlasting memories.

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Footnotes

Chapter 56: Corpse King Freed

[1] Lines from “Questions to Heaven” in Verses of Chu, by Warring States-era poet Qu Yuan.

Chapter 62: The Ghost King Awakens

[2] Maternal uncle.

Chapter 64: The Seven Emotions and Six Desires

[3] A reference to the Da Zhidu Lun or Mahaprajnaparamitopadesa, a treatise on Mahayana Buddhist doctrine also known as the Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom.

Chapter 65: His Descent to Earth, as Destined

[4] A bodhisattva mahasattva who represents the power of wisdom. His name means “arrival of great strength.”

Chapter 70: A Pair of Horses on a Snowy Field

[5] Lines from “Song of the Swordsman” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

[6] Line from “On Returning Home, Part 1: Returning Home as an Unrecognized Old Man,” by Tang dynasty poet He Zhizhang.

Chapter 71: A Promise Not Made Lightly

[7] Lines from “An Ode to the Bitter Cold” by Han dynasty statesman and warlord Cao Cao.

Chapter 73: The Bitter Truth

[8] Opening lines of “Part Nine” from “Twelve Poems in the Style of the Ancients” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 74: Perilous Peaks

[9] Lines from “Moon Over the Mountain Pass” by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

Chapter 75: An Unexpected Guest

[10] Sister-in-law.

Chapter 77: A Reckoning

[11] From “Ode to the Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup” by Tang dynasty poet Du Fu.

Chapter 78: I Love You So

[12] Lines from “By the Heavens,” a yuefu folk poem written in the Han dynasty.

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GUARDIAN
OF DREAMS
With the help of Mergen, Hongjun and Li Jinglong have successfully roused the ghost king from his waking dream—but the danger is not yet over. The group soon learns that the one responsible for entrapping the ghost king is none other than the white deer Mergen seeks, a god of dreams who has fallen under sway of the mysterious yao king. Worse still, the yao king has used the deer's power to take control of the ghost king's army, and more undead soldiers are on the way.
Before they can formulate a plan, Lu Xu, the fleet-footed scout Mergen rescued on the northern border, sets off alone in the snow. When Hongjun goes after him, he too finds himself snared in a nightmare of the enemy's making—a vision of his own forgotten past that will upend everything he thought he knew about himself, his parents, and even Li Jinglong.
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